ART AND AESTHETIC EDUCATION: A PAINTER’S PHILOSOPHY

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis proposes that regular artistic creativity and self-expression in the classroom develop greater aesthetic understanding. I believe that the shaping and appreciation of aesthetic form provides students with a visual language for personal expression, making art education a crucial component of today's curriculum. Gaining greater understanding concerning the significant meaning of artistic self-expression has both personal and social relevance. The shaping and appreciation of artistic form across time and place facilitates aesthetic comprehension of the complexity inherent in a work of art. I will discuss these claims in terms of artistic form in my own paintings, in order to better articulate certain complex aesthetic ideas which are difficult to express in words alone. Kant was the first Western philosopher who grasped the complexity of the human mind. He argues aesthetic judgment and human rationality require the unifying power of the imagination to bring harmonious unity between sensible intuition and the intellect.

Kant's philosophy articulates a new conceptual aesthetic understanding that developed during modernity when artistic creativity became a form of visual thinking, as well as a personal expression of greater self consciousness. During the Renaissance, European painting increasingly expressed how artists saw the world in a new aesthetic language. Later, Impressionism, Expressionism and Cubism challenged the Western tradition of painting and aesthetic understanding of artistic form, leading to the postmodernist deconstruction of both language and art. Some contemporary artists use art-making to reach beyond the modemist search for self-consciousness in order to create meaningful artistic form. This requires new language games in order to express social concerns in a 'subtler' language of art, linking ethics and morality to broadening aesthetic understanding. Developing aesthetic understanding requires an enlightened eye; thus, art education is a crucial component in today's curriculum.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to all lovers of art and philosophy.
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CHAPTER ONE
THE VALUE OF ARTISTIC CREATIVITY IN SCHOOL

Introduction:

This thesis proposes that regular artistic creativity and self-expression in the classroom develop greater aesthetic understanding. I believe that the shaping and appreciation of aesthetic form provides students with a visual language for personal expression, making art education a crucial component of today's curriculum. Gaining greater understanding concerning the significant meaning of artistic self-expression has both personal and social relevance. The shaping and appreciation of artistic form across time and place facilitate aesthetic comprehension of the complexity inherent in a work of art. I will discuss these claims in terms of artistic form in my own paintings, in order to better articulate certain complex aesthetic ideas which are difficult to express in words alone.

Kant was the first Western philosopher who grasped the complexity of the human mind. He argues aesthetic judgment and human rationality require the unifying power of the imagination to bring harmonious unity between sensible intuition and the intellect. Kant's philosophy articulates a new conceptual aesthetic understanding that developed during modernity when artistic creativity became a form of visual thinking, as well as a personal expression of greater self consciousness.

During the Renaissance, European painting increasingly expressed how artists saw the world in a new aesthetic language. Later, Impressionism, Expressionism and Cubism challenged the Western tradition of painting and aesthetic understanding of artistic form, leading to the postmodernist deconstruction of both language and art. Some contemporary artists use art-making to reach beyond the modernist search for
self-consciousness in order to create meaningful artistic form. This requires new language games in order to express social concerns in a 'subtler' language of art, linking ethics and morality to broadening aesthetic understanding. Developing aesthetic understanding requires an enlightened eye; thus, art education is a crucial component in today's curriculum.

The function of art education

What is the value of artistic creativity and the shaping of artistic form in today's classroom? I believe that there are many good reasons why learning to make and appreciate works of art has educational value. Art students learn to make good aesthetic judgments in shaping aesthetically pleasing artistic form. By artistic form I mean the outline or structure of something, for example a figure, image or an aesthetic idea. This is both beneficial for their personal well-being, as well as the well-being of the community. Not only does the regular practice of making artistic form develop eye, hand and mind coordination, but students also learn to think more clearly and make good choices.

The shaping of form may also develop greater personal insight, build self esteem and broaden the mind. By mind I mean the ability to reason and understand the meaning of perception and experience, which requires the imagination to harmonize between sensible intuition and the intellect. The complexity of the human mind embodies intentionality, the will as well as wishes, purposes and desires. Mind also encompasses memory, recollection and remembrance, as well as what a person is thinking and feeling. Webster's dictionary defines mind as "that which thinks, perceives, feels, wills, etc., the seat or subject of consciousness; the thinking and perceiving part of consciousness [and] the unconscious together as a unit; the psyche" (1972, :1144). For
me, the mind is where body, spirit, soul, the intellect and the intuitive, as well as the 
primordial meet and finds expression in the shaping and appreciation of artistic form.

Students benefit from art-making in school when it involves playing with shape, 
texture, colour and form. Manipulating the materiality of the medium cultivates their 
cognitive and aesthetic sensibilities, which may be carried over into pragmatic 
engagements with the real world. Works of art are expressions of a special kind of 
conceptual experience which may be deeply emotional; and capable of touching the 
heart as well as mind, with the vitality of its artistic form.

But a problematic focus on art theory, rather than art-making in many schools 
today has diminished the quality and availability of art classes. Consequently, art 
students typically lack the necessary knowledge of rules and skills to make successful 
works of art, and many contemporary artists have rejected the traditional notion of 
beauty and artistic form. However, there are many valid reasons for practicing art­ 
making in the classroom. On the one hand, the shaping of artistic form has educational 
value because it teaches better aesthetic perception and understanding. On the other 
hand, sharing art work in the classroom also has significant social value, because 
students learn to appreciate personal and cultural differences, which is of vital 
importance for the cohesion of Canada's multicultural society.

A formal education is accepted by many as being a good and worthwhile pursuit 
for its own sake. Fundamentally, the function of education is to develop the embodied 
mind to understand and reason better. In the process of learning to make appropriate 
aesthetic and ethical judgments, cognitive, perceptual, and affective abilities are 
developed. Learning the value of making good judgments often leads to a greater sense 
of self worth, which may facilitate greater tolerance and respect for personal and cultural
differences. A good education teaches students to articulate how they perceive the world, in a common language others are able to understand.

However, sometimes a common language of words and text may not be sufficient to fully express a particular perspective. It may necessitate inventing a new language game that speaks in a ‘subtler’ language of artistic form. As students learn to express themselves in new aesthetic language games, they develop the ability to see artistic form in the materiality of a particular art medium. Art education teaches the importance of authentic self expression, both in personal art-making practice as well as in appreciating the art work of others. I believe that the shaping and enjoyment of works of art opens the heart and mind to reach beyond personal and cultural limitations, in order to make good and innovative aesthetic judgments.

Regular art-making practice cultivates participants’ aesthetic sensibilities, enabling them to understand that the shaping and appreciation of artistic form relates to the ability to enjoy the beauty of the moment. Authentic artistic self expression makes sensible intuition visible in a complex and meaningful form that may be intuitively understood. Form in a work of art is often a rich and composite aesthetic statement, whose meaning cannot be fully articulated in any other way. The making and appreciation of artistic form expands the mental capacity to grasp many levels of personal and cultural meaning of what the artist has expressed in a work of art.

The painting in figure 1 entitled Coming to Meet illustrates what I mean by the mind’s ability to grasp different levels of composite meaning that may be embedded in artistic form. On one level, these two figures represent an encounter between the masculine and feminine principles, which is a recurring theme in my work. The figures in this painting demonstrate that form and content cannot be separated, but one defines
the other. In one sense, this is also true of the connective relationship between masculine and feminine energies in general.

![Image of two figures facing each other]

Fig. 1 Coming to Meet [1995]

This image brings into visual form a particular state of mind, because it articulates a personal insight into the possibility of a meaningful and respectful dialogue between two distinct and opposite ways of being human. Although some postmodern thinkers deny the existence of binary opposites, I believe they serve as a useful metaphor for different ways of understanding.

The title Coming to Meet pays tribute to the I Ching, the ancient Chinese Book of Changes. I used this particular title intentionally to express a more general desire for a meaningful and respectful dialogue between East and West. I like the structure of the I
Ching because it is based on the four natural elements; namely earth, fire, water and air. In addition, each of the elements is influenced by the duality and pleasant tension between the active masculine, and the passive feminine energies.

On a more personal level, these figures bring into form a continuous process of growth in an artistic quest to reconcile artistic creativity and aesthetic philosophy. This painting is intimately related to the painting in figure 62 entitled *Art and Philosophy*, because it shows that a certain amount of progress has been made in this quest. In this image the encounter between male and female seems tense, as both figures approach each other with a mingling of curiosity and cautious apprehension. Adding to this tension, a crescent moon almost blocks the attempt of a meeting between these two forms.

However, artistic form in this painting does seem to demonstrate that there is a possibility of developing a relationship between these two equal and distinctly different human energies. Artistic form in context with this particular title also opens up the possibility of reconciling the language of words and text, with the making of a meaningful visual image. For me, it is significant that more than a dozen years later, the unified image of the male and female in *Art and Philosophy*, shows that this oppositional tension has to some extent been harmonized.

Practicing artistic creativity in the classroom may bring pressing social issues into aesthetic form, whose meaning often provides greater insight and understanding of personal events, in context with cultural ethics and morality. Regular art-making and aesthetic appreciation is satisfying for its own sake, because students learn to perceive the unity and connectivity of human existence, which broadens their understanding of the world. To some extent, artistic creativity and self expression in artistic form will be
influenced by the environment in which an artist lives. To illustrate the environmental influence on artistic creativity, take the painting in figure 2 entitled *Rain Forest*. Form in this painting was inspired by the cedar forests of British Columbia, because these magnificent trees line the banks of the mountain stream that runs through the place where I live.
Although form in this painting has been highly stylized, my intention was to represent a realistic sense of the density of the forested landscape on the West Coast of British Columbia. In this painting, colour, texture and form all seem to unite, in order to articulate the majesty of the cedars for which the West Coast is justifiably famous. For me, the only way I could do justice to the vastness and monumentality of this landscape was to imagine it in abstract form, because there seemed no way to do it justice by imitating reality. This painting dates from 1986, and its highly stylized form represents a very early stage in my aesthetic development as an expressive painter.

Fresh out of art school, I had been experimenting with different types of paint and various painting applications. In this painting, gold enamel paint was applied over an initial layer of acrylic, in order to reinforce the idea of indescribable value, as well as to define and shape the sensuousness and form of these monumental trees. The application of gold enamel paint emphasized the natural tree-like shapes that had taken form when colour was randomly applied to the canvas, and left to mingle as it dried. Shaping the chaos of colour with the gold enamel gave structure and form to the image, while the paint's richness may be interpreted as a visual metaphor for the tremendous value of the West Coast rain forest. These trees are not merely a lucrative cash crop, but they are also a vital part of the collective 'lungs' of the planet. In fact, there are large reddish lung-like shapes defined within the green of the forest.

Art studies are not just about learning rules and skills, nor the acquisition of facts and instrumental knowledge. Shaping aesthetic form develops the ability to make creative connections between intellectual concepts and experience that goes far beyond any language rules. Shaping artistic form teaches students to make their own unique connections between different ideas, which expands the ability to comprehend the inherent meaning of life, in an increasingly complex world. All too often, logic and
instrumental reason offer only a limited explanation of things, and comprehending the meaning behind events may sometimes require making an imaginative leap in judgment. The regular practice of art-making and aesthetic appreciation has pedagogical value because the implicit is made explicit, which often provides greater insight and understanding of the human condition.

Studying works of art in the classroom develops the mental ability to grasp often complex levels of meaning which have been made visible in an artistic form. Intuitive aesthetic enjoyment deepens students’ awareness that an art work articulates a unique personal insight, yet its form will also be culturally determined. Grasping the significance of the connectivity of human existence may also develop the capacity for empathy and tolerance of individual and cultural differences, often transforming long held prejudices. As students learn to make good choices based on reason, as well as feeling and intuition, they may also learn to accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions. If students are given the freedom to experiment in their art-making activities, they learn that the creative process is never a recipe to be followed. They also discover the value of learning from their mistakes, as well as sometimes savoring their triumph when artistic form is just right.

The shaping and making of aesthetically pleasing art objects demonstrates the value of perseverance and not giving up, because it often takes years to master a particular artistic discipline. Including artistic creativity in classroom activities encourages students to be more observant of the many different kinds of aesthetically pleasing form, as well as recognizing the places in their world where beauty may still be sadly lacking. One of the aims of art education is to show students how to see, hear, feel and understand certain aesthetic concepts such as beauty and harmonious unity which are inherent in most forms of artistic creativity. The making and enjoyment of a
work of art often inspires philosophical reflection concerning the potential for authentic self expression as a personal search for aesthetic understanding. For example, the painting in figure 3 entitled *Fallen Angels* makes visible a contemplative idea about the nature of fallen angels, in relation to my Western cultural heritage.
These figures were inspired by the natural movement and liquidity of paint, as streams of colour travelled across the canvas, leaving their tracks behind. The form in this painting suggests an aerial perspective, as if the image is seen from an airplane, or a bird's eye view high above the landscape. Although highly abstracted in form, the meaning behind this image has been defined by using specific colours as visual metaphors. For example, the bright blue sky is juxtaposed by dark, jagged forms, which are splayed across the green landscape.

This image brings to mind the ancient Greek myth of Icarus, who flew too close to the sun. Icarus aspired to greater heights, although warned not to, and the heat of the sun melted his wings as he tumbled into the sea below. However, the colour, form and title also imply that artistic form in this painting is intended as an allegory of the mythical war in heaven, ending when the rebellious angels were cast out by God. Rather than using gold enamel paint to pull out artistic form, here it is used as under-painting and left visible to define form. Using metallic gold enamel as under-painting is also reminiscent of *cloisonné*, and this jewel-like effect makes reference to the cultural richness of ancient Western mythology.

I believe that participating in, and enjoying the inherent goodness of making artistic form is a crucial component of human existence, and authentic artistic self expression is vital for the well-being of the entire global community. As Beardsley points out, “analysis of artistic goodness is of the greatest philosophical significance [because] the ground of artistic goodness, as all other forms of goodness is [crucial] for human welfare” (1982:79). The aesthetic appreciation of goodness and beautiful artistic form lifts the human spirit, and expands people’s awareness of quality and excellence, allowing the mind to reach beyond the horizons of an otherwise flat and nihilistic world.
It is imperative that students cultivate their aesthetic sensibility, and that the study of art and artistic creativity takes its rightful place in the contemporary curriculum. As Beardsley argues, the “artist should be encouraged to create [and] study of the arts should be an essential part of our school and college curricula” (1982:69). The study of art-making and appreciation in the classroom is more than justified for its own sake, because it develops valuable communication skills that students need to fully express themselves, intellectually as well as aesthetically.

**Problems in contemporary art education**

There has been a tendency in art education over the past several decades to focus on art theory, rather than the practice of art-making itself. This theoretical focus has contributed to the impoverishment of the aesthetic education of many contemporary artists, as well as diminishing the quality and excellence of much contemporary art. Many artists today lack the necessary rules and skills they require to work in a particular medium, which regular artistic creativity cultivates.

The lack of art-making practice and the necessary knowledge of the rules and skills, has led to a general rejection of beauty and artistic form in contemporary art, as well as in many people’s lives. As the quality of contemporary art deteriorated, and the practice of art-making in school became a thing of the past, the scope and availability of fundamental art courses in many Canadian colleges and universities were also diminished. This has damaged all types of aesthetic aspects in the arts and in modern life, which is also reflected in the devastation of the natural environment.

In addition, it has become increasingly clear that many contemporary art education programs have also rejected the important social role the arts have traditionally played in the general well-being and cohesion of society. Since before the
ancient Greeks, art in its many forms has been central to the seasonal celebrations of life and cycles of the year. In most cultures across the globe, the arts have traditionally brought people together to share and enjoy the diversity and unity of human artistic expression. In other words, for centuries art reflected life and visa versa.

**The educational value of art-making**

Studying artistic form across time and place demonstrates that the cultural and philosophical traditions that have been the foundations for all the arts can retain their value for contemporary society. Greater understanding of culturally significant philosophical ideas develops the ability to see and express a personal perspective of events in the context of a broader world view. Artistic creativity requires aesthetic attention which tends to slow the perceptual process down, so students can discern the subtle nuances and variations of form in objects which are usually overlooked.

Slowing down and paying attention to aesthetic details during the art-making process matters, because this act of reflection refines perceptual and mental abilities to reason well. Practicing the shaping of artistic form involves carefully exploring many possible options, which requires taking the necessary time to grasp and communicate a unique perspective of life. For example, the painting in figure 4 entitled *Kali*, developed naturally from manipulating wet oil paint with my hands, and reflecting on the possible meaning of artistic form as it developed from the imaginative unity between eyes, hands and the mind.

Fluid colour was poured from cans onto a flat piece of primed canvas lying on the floor, and soon artistic form began to appear as if by magic. As the paint moved across the canvas, it was intriguing to see aesthetically pleasing patterns in the marks left in the
wet paint by the texture of rubber gloves. With practice, I soon learned to manipulate these pleasant surprises, which often happen during the creative process.

![Fig. 4 Kali (1987)](image)

When structure and form in this painting were established, the title Kali came to mind, a name which again makes reference to ancient mythology. The name Kali comes from an ancient Indian goddess, who in her negative form was worshipped as the
great destroyer and goddess of war. The image of Kali as the personification of the horror of war recurs again in later paintings. For me, choosing a title is an important part of finishing a painting, because words and text help to partially explain the meaning of its artistic form. Another reason these paintings have names is because the visual image communicates an unknown part of myself of which I was not previously aware. Finding a title that fits the image completes the work, and to some extent explains the inherent complexity of meaning behind an imaginative form, which originates in the mind.

Aesthetic appreciation is an affective and contemplative response to a unique artistic style and the formal qualities of personal artistic self expression. It requires trusting the imagination to make an intuitive aesthetic judgment, and decide where the rules end, or where there are no rules. Eisner agrees, and he adds that studying artistic creativity also teaches students to “appraise the consequences of one’s choices and to revise and then to make other choices” (2004:5). Meaningful aesthetic experience builds on previous aesthetic encounters, as people develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of beauty and artistic form.

Artistic creativity trains the eye to see pattern, form and proportions, while developing fluency and greater skill at coordinating hand and eye movements; an indispensable ability for making art work that can withstand the test of time. Freedom to experiment in the classroom encourages students to use their imaginations, in order to balance personal sensibilities and intuition with intellectual understanding of things that go far beyond their daily and mundane consumer concerns. In the art education classroom, the search for authentic self expression sometimes becomes a powerful collaborative aesthetic experience, as students share their art-making activities and open their minds to the value of different and unfamiliar perspectives.
Aesthetic understanding is contingent upon various and often unfamiliar human perspectives, which may require paying respectful attention to new possibilities of aesthetic interpretation. As Greene points out, "imagination is needed to see a better world and to be yourself [in a] process of creating a self, an identity" (2000:20). Often imagining alternative ways of shaping a work of art opens up fresh new techniques for finding meaningful artistic form. For example, the painting in figure 5 entitled *Search for the Centre* was painted without the use of traditional brushes, or painter's easel.

The idea behind this painting developed on a 6' by 8' piece of canvas, which was stretched only when the image was finished. This method of working was influenced by Jackson Pollock's technique of pouring paint in random fashion all over the canvas, without any preconceived notion about its determinate form. Working in a larger format,
particularly with this painting, mattered to me because the image was intended to represent several important and intersecting ideas. Originally, this image was inspired by a crosscut view of a spiral inside a conch shell when it is cut in half. The inward winding spiral also brings to mind the idea of a labyrinth. The image of a labyrinth is commonly understood as a visual metaphor for the human journey, and this form is encountered in many different cultures across the globe.

Labyrinths are also an important spiritual image, going back to the ancient Greeks and the mythology of the Minotaur. But labyrinths have also been found on the floors of medieval cathedrals, as well as in the gardens of the troubadours located all over Europe. In addition, this form is also an important aspect of Native American and Buddhist mythology. For this reason, the labyrinth seems to be a uniquely global artistic form, with tremendous potential for cultural sharing and aesthetic understanding.

The title *Search for the Center* refers to the process of individuation, a personal journey of self discovery and search for the meaning of the cycles of life. The larger scale of this canvas was also intended to evoke a sense of the universe, reinforced by the painting’s shape and colour, implying a bird’s eye view of the Milky Way from Earth. The spiralling pattern of a labyrinth within a conch shell reflecting the universe demonstrates the similarity between micro and macro visualization.

Multiple layers of personal and cultural meaning intersect in this painting, and contribute to the viewer’s aesthetic enjoyment and interpretation. This process of self discovery may at times shock a person’s sensibilities through an unexpected leap of the imagination, revealing how little a person actually knows and how much there still is to learn. It seems that there is always a gap between past and present experience, which may involve risking an imaginative leap into the unknown. The delight of an aesthetic
experience, which often accompanies the practice of artistic creativity, has the power to release the imagination, opening the doors of perception as well as the intellect.

For example, the image in the painting in figure 6 entitled *Tears of the Sun* utters a critique of colonialism. The title was inspired by the native Inca name for gold, and implies the plundering of First Nations' culture during the conquest of America.

![Fig. 6 Tears of the Sun (1987)](image)

This image depicts a large, fractured sun on a metallic gold enamel background, which is shedding a river of blood. This painting is intended as a visual metaphor for the cultural devastation of the original inhabitants of the Americas. In addition, there is also an abstracted suggestion of landscape, where the paint has coagulated into a putrid brownish green. These dark colours and shapes are intended to refer to the abominable
cruelty of the conquistadors, whose greed for gold all but decimated the native population.

This devastation extended to every aspect of life; not only did they rape and kill the local people, but the landscape as well. These forms and corresponding ideas developed spontaneously during the creative art-making process, as the eyes, hands and mind played with the subtleties and implications of suggested meaning. As shape and form developed, a visual metaphor came to mind which went far beyond the surface of paint on a canvas. For me, this painting shouts of the horrors of war and the violent conquest of other cultures, which still goes on today, for much the same reasons.

Artistic self expression and grasping the meaning behind an aesthetic idea is both a cognitive and affective process that requires the free play of the imagination to make the necessary mental connections. Artistic creativity and aesthetic appreciation keep the imagination flexible so the mind is able to discover form in a particular art medium; whether it is a concert, painting, film, play, story, dance or song. Studying form in all the arts has value for education because artistic and creative self expression demonstrates that everyone is an artist at heart.

Learning to dance, sing, act, paint, draw or sculpt involves exercising not only intellectual and aesthetic skills, but it also demands that every part of the body works harmoniously together to give expression to an aesthetic idea. Articulating these ideas in a visual expression of artistic form expands the ability to feel, think and make thoughtful aesthetic judgments. Aesthetic understanding also serves the greater good because the attempt to comprehend the meaning of form induces a reciprocal dialogue with a work of art.
For example, the three highly abstracted forms in the painting in figure 7 entitled *Waiting Ravens* seem to articulate a sense of intense fear and sorrow.

These ethereal figures appeared as if by magic, and they have a rhythm all their own, which often speaks of wisdom, if I can bring them into form. Form in this painting
reminds me of Gauguin’s *Spirit of the Dead Watching*; which he painted when his young Polynesian wife lay dying. It seems to me that this painting has a similar sense of pathos and desperation, perhaps because the brooding intensity within the large areas of dark paint dominates both paintings.

Originating in the apparent chaos of colour and paint, artistic form in this painting was juxtaposed by using flat blocks of colour, emphasizing the natural fluidity and painterly texture of acrylic. For me, the contrast between this natural Baroque’s fluidity and mechanical Minimalist’s flatness articulates a visual pun that speaks of the duality of all human existence. The contrast between hard edged enamel paint and the natural mingling of fluid acrylic colour creates a pleasant tension, which seems to energize this image with a promise to reveal its hidden meaning to both artist and viewer alike.

The language of art speaks of a particular and personal expression; however an aesthetic utterance may also reflect the community as a whole. In my own work, the search for artistic form begins with the paint’s unique fluid nature which, when allowed to mingle, presents seemingly impossible and fascinating colour combinations and forms. Aesthetic perception and understanding is a continuous learning process of evaluating and interpreting the complexity of interlaced formal relationships between composition and content.

There is a marked similarity in the treatment of artistic form in this painting compared to an earlier painting [fig. 3 entitled *Fallen Angels*] because both these paintings were made around the same time as part of a small series painted in 1987. This series began my exploration of giving artistic form a spiritual dimension, after being inspired by *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting* exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in Los Angeles, California.
This monumental art exhibition brought together paintings by artists as diverse as Gauguin, Dove, Kandinsky, Toorop, Hodler, Klee, Duchamp, Mullican, Kupka, O'Keefe, Klein and Johns. The visual evidence of seeing these works of art in context with the literature and philosophy which had inspired these artists was a powerful aesthetic revelation concerning the cultural and historical connection between artistic form and human spirituality.

Student artists develop a good eye for aesthetic form when they study art works in context with the time and place in which they were made. Knowledge of different styles of artistic expression, as well as knowing something about the artist's personal philosophy and cultural history may be relevant for learning discerning critical thinking skills. Learning to make artistic form expands the ability to see with an aesthetically enlightened eye and connects to a deeper and more complex human understanding. Broadening aesthetic perception and understanding is relevant for education in general because it builds a sense of empathy for self and others.

Sharing personal approaches to artistic creativity in the classroom connects students on a deeper human level. It may also open the heart and mind; a worthwhile personal and educational experience in itself. Art students discover that authentic engagement with artistic form is a valuable source of learning that requires persistence, intense concentration and the courage to begin again, when other attempts have failed. Even the great artist Picasso has been heard to say that an artist cannot be a magician every time.

While practicing the shaping of form, students have to make many stylistic and aesthetic choices, in order authentically to interpret their unique perception and understanding of experience. Making and sharing art work in the classroom often
facilitates a greater sense of empathy in students, because aesthetic appreciation expands their ability to grasp the underlying similarity between self and others. Seeing and enjoying artist form involves the willingness to enter into a reciprocal dialogue with the art work for itself. It also requires attending to the artist’s intended meaning of artistic form, and to make an honest attempt to respond with pleasure to the complexity of a different human perspective.

**The social value of art education**

It is important for art teachers to assess the aesthetic value of artistic creativity in the classroom based on an accurate interpretation of an art work’s intended meaning. However, making an accurate assessment of students’ art work is sometimes very difficult, and may require further explanation. This may be because teaching and learning, as Greene argues, is “one incomplete person [reaching out] to another incomplete person” (2000:27-28). It is also true that many artists prefer to leave some details out of their work, suggesting artistic form rather than making it explicit.

It seems that simplifying artistic form serves to draw viewers into a reciprocal process of mental creativity, which is often a far richer aesthetic experience because it requires using the imagination. For example, it may require an imaginative viewer to interpret artistic form in the painting in figure 8 entitled *Floating Venus* as a personal expression of a broader perspective of the cultural history of European art. Making this particular image was intended as a personal tribute to the Venus of Willendorf, a tiny sculpture thought to be between 25,000 and 40,000 years old, and one of the oldest works of art in the world.

For many contemporary women, the Venus of Willendorf has become an icon, representing one of the oldest cult objects made in honour of the ancient mother
goddess. Although this tiny sculpture fits in the palm of the hand, its size does not diminish the monumental power of its artistic form.

Fig. 8 Floating Venus [1988]

By painting a much larger representation of this tiny stone sculpture, my hope was to avoid the possibility of plagiarism, and merely imitating another work of art. This larger format was also intended to pay tribute to the influence this work of art has had on my own art-making, and on a more general level to the tremendous self awareness of
feminine history this artistic form has given to contemporary women. Another reason for its large scale reflects my conviction that people, and women in particular, need to be reminded of the personal and social value of the idea of an ancient goddess mother. Perhaps relearning respect for the feminine in general may facilitate personal and collective balance in the world. I also wanted to represent this Venus figure as floating among the stars because it seemed that it is where she belongs. Painted larger than life among the stars, this image of the Venus of Willendorf makes reference to the planet Venus, as a visual metaphor of peace and love expressed in artistic form.

Artistic creativity and aesthetic appreciation develop the imagination as well as a personal awareness of living in a particular place in time. Imaginative contemplation of the enduring values of the past remains relevant today because it may provide a necessary vision for a better future. Studying works of art across time and place is important for education because the variety of artistic forms can speak eloquently of the enduring values of human accomplishment. Consequently, art students learn to strive for these aesthetic and ethical ideals because these human values have often been internalized.

The diversity of artistic self expression shows each person interprets and responds differently to reality. Understanding the artist’s intended meaning may require imaginative flexibility and setting personal sensibilities aside, in order to grasp the complexity of aesthetic self expression. As Greene points out, “using our imagination by decentering ourselves [breaks] the confinements of privatism and self-regard” (2000:31). Open-minded study of artistic form teaches students to see beyond the limits of their personal perception of reality. An expanded world view may broaden their concern for others because aesthetic enjoyment transcends individual and cultural frames of reference. I agree with Greene who points out, “art reaches beyond what is established
and leads those who are willing to risk transformation to the shaping of a [better] social vision" (2000:30). To illustrate this point, the painting in figure 9 entitled *Naked before the Goddess* speaks of an alternative view of human spirituality, which centers on a feminine conception of the divine.

![Fig. 9 Naked before the Goddess (1988)](image-url)
At the time this painting was made, it had become increasingly clear that the
predominant masculine conception of ‘God’ had done tremendous damage to the status
of women and the natural world, with devastating results. This painting gives visual form
to the idea that ‘God’ could just as well be feminine, which was a daring new concept at
the time; flying in the face of everything I had been taught. The notion of the feminine in
human spirituality, as well as in art, history and philosophy, was actively suppressed for
millenia, in both the Protestant and Catholic Church.

However, during the 1980’s many books were published, challenging this
predominant masculine conception of the divine. For example, Merlin Stone’s When
God was a Woman and Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood, along with M. Esther Harding’s
The Way of All Women and Woman’s Mysteries had tremendous influence on my work.
Contemporary literature and film showed images of the ‘goddess’ in her many forms,
whose image reflected both cultural unity, as well as diversity.

Although the image of the feminine divine often changed from place to place,
some variation of her influence can be found across the globe. The abundance of
available texts and visual images since the 1980’s, has made the notion of ‘goddess’
veneration public knowledge, inspiring many artists to explore this ‘new’ aesthetic
concept of the feminine within a spiritual context. Especially along the West Coast of
North America, the artistic imagination had discovered an appropriate aesthetic form by
which to express an aesthetic idea whose meaning still contains much personal and
cultural currency.

This painting may be interpreted as somewhat autobiographical, because the
image of the woman personifies the beginning of a lifelong, personal transformative
journey towards greater self consciousness and aesthetic understanding. This image
also articulates a critique of the dominance of the masculine over the feminine in the cultural and historical record of contemporary Western society. Neglecting the artistic and philosophical contributions of women over the centuries has become an issue some contemporary artists have tried to address. Not only have women been marginalized in the cultural and historical record, but the artistic and philosophical contributions of other cultures for the most part have also been excluded.

The object of teaching students to shape artistic form is to be open-ended and flexible, yet set attainable limits for each student within the collective framework of classroom creativity. Art students learn they have personal agency, as well as self determination, and often realize that they are not just products of cultural consumerism, but have a unique point of view which needs to be expressed.

Although each generation sees things differently, each person has a special part to play in the collective quest for positive cultural transformation, and enlightened development in the arts. As students learn to choose the right method for meaningful self expression, they also learn to become better informed viewers, who are able to respond with aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment to new forms of art. Through the sounds of music, a sensuous dance or a beautiful painted image, the subtle language of art embraces the complexity and diversity of human consciousness.

The study of art work from other cultures is important in a multicultural classroom because it may develop a profound understanding of the commonality of human nature. For example, studying West Coast First Nations’ painting and sculpture expands students’ knowledge of the cultural and spiritual meaning behind these sensuous animal images. The aesthetical understanding of the importance of totem animals for this culture provides a broader perception of local indigenous traditions in context with
historical events, imbuing students with a better understanding of their unique place within the global community.

However, sometimes grasping the full meaning of an art work made in another culture is difficult, because viewers may have only limited knowledge of vital individual and cultural differences, hampering an accurate interpretation. Many Canadian classrooms today are ethnically diverse; therefore it is important to adopt a greater sensitivity towards different cultural artistic traditions, in order to appreciate what makes the art-making of others unique. A well developed art education program should skilfully blend respectful tribute and appreciation of other cultural traditions with the enduring aesthetic values, skills and ideas concerning the artistic form of Western culture.

Multicultural aesthetic understanding

Learning to express a personal perception of the world is the foundation of all education. Self expression in artistic form broadens the mind and develops the ability to imagine creatively. As students exercise their mental ability to imagine artistic form in ordinary things, they learn to articulate and enjoy this special knowledge in a painting, a play or in a song. The enjoyment of artistic form with other students may also help people live more humanely in what often seems an inhumane world. The study of artistic creativity in the classroom, whether in the participation of art-making itself, or in aesthetic appreciation encourages a special kind of perception.

Seeing a unique shape or pattern with a finer sense of aesthetic perception may enable the mind to grasp the interconnected relationship between meaningful artistic form and aesthetic understanding, because the imagination has unified sensible intuition with the intellect. Artistic form speaks in a 'subtler' language, making thought visible and public in order to express what cannot be spoken of easily in words. For example, the
painting in figure 10 entitled *Ishtar with Moon on her Lap*, articulates an aesthetic idea in a visual image not easily communicated in words alone.

Fig. 10 Ishtar with Moon on her Lap [1989]
This celebratory visual image of the ancient Sumerian goddess Ishtar was personally reassuring because many of my other paintings at the time were darkly chaotic, and strangely incoherent. Challenging the status quo had created powerful conflicting energies in my work, as well as in my life, shaking the very foundations of what I had believed to be true. But there was no turning back, and it required tenacity and courage to continue this artistic journey in order to bring these aesthetic ideas into the public domain. Bringing a mental idea into visible form meant that its image could then be reflectively contemplated, and intuitively understood.

The image of the moon is a reoccurring motif in my work, perhaps because of its feminine character, whose monthly phases mimic a woman’s menstrual cycle. In many cultures women still refer to this time of the month as ‘moon time’, as they rest and gossip with other women friends. In contrast to contemporary Western culture, these few days each month are a time of quiet contemplation and reflection on the special regenerative power of nature. The three-fold character of the waxing and waning moon may also be understood as depicting the feminine life cycle; as maiden, mother and crone. In addition, the moon’s three-foldedness also suggests the natural cycles of decay and regeneration in an endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

Historically, the arts and humanities have a rich descriptive tradition of aesthetic appraisal of a particular world view, be it in literature, dance, drama, poetry, music or the visual arts. Long before the tragic plays of ancient Greece, the arts helped shape and articulate human thought and experience; yet the educational curriculum today generally fails to realize the importance of studying artistic form and promoting art-making in the schools. Negating the importance of studying artistic creativity and aesthetic appreciation in today’s curriculum may be the result of a limited understanding of what exactly constitutes the acquisition of human knowledge.
If one of the aims of education is to teach students greater understanding of the complexity of life, art studies are central for the curriculum because art students learn to express how they see the world in a unique artistic form. Human rationality involves both the intellect and sensible intuition; which requires the connective ability to imagine, in order to unify perception with understanding. Sometimes grasping the meaning of an image may shock or inspire a sense of wonder, but once feeling has been expressed and made public it is then better understood. Once thought and feeling have been expressed, these two opposing mental abilities can then be rationally reconciled, and it seems that the image retains a sense of peace and harmony, which can then be shared with others.

The expression of thought and feelings in a visual image also develops the ability to comprehend that the acquisition of knowledge is worthwhile and good in its own right. Most people have the intellectual capacity for lifelong learning, and there will always be more knowledge to discover. It seems to me that the fountain of knowledge in Western culture alone will take many lifetimes to obtain, let alone grasping the wisdom inherent in other societies. But I believe that learning to appreciate and understand the meaning of artistic form made by different people and cultures facilitates a greater capacity for empathy.

For example, the painting in figure 11 entitled Valley of the Masks draws its inspiration from the distinctive art work of the West Coast First Nations’ people. This painting intends to pay tribute to the traditional masks of the native people of British Columbia, without expropriating or imitating their unique style. This painting was begun by pouring diluted oil paint on the flat surface of the canvas, and the colour was encouraged to mix together in what appears to be a random manner. When the application of paint was finished, the canvas was lifted up to let the paint drip down; its
‘tear-like’ forms speak of the negative impact of colonization on the indigenous people, and the environment of the Pacific West Coast.

These beautiful hand-carved masks, unique to Canada’s West Coast, embody tremendous cultural meaning for the First Nations’ people. Stylized natural forms depict family crests, and each clan’s animal totem is a uniquely crafted artistic form. For these people masks are considered to be family heirlooms to be passed down from the elders to the younger generation. In this culture, owning a mask gives someone special privileges along with a special name, and specific social obligations.

Masks are a valuable part of the ceremonial regalia, worn during the winter season communal dances as well as at family celebrations. In addition, masks are believed to embody special spiritual power; therefore they are highly valued and kept in
a special place of honor within the home. Not only in America, but all over the world including many places in Europe, masks are believed to contain special personal and cultural power. Many people today still wear masks during carnival and masquerades, as well as during seasonal and family celebrations.

Learning to make and appreciate artistic form confirms that the learning process is never fixed or finite and the connectivity between subject and object remains fluid and ever changing. However, this life-long learning process requires the development of a flexible imagination, in order to make the necessary cognitive and affective connections. In addition, engaging with artistic form develops the ability to reason well. Artistic creativity requires the imaginative use of both thoughts and feelings which are necessary for a greater understanding of a personal sense of morality. The shaping of an aesthetic expression of thought or feeling does seem to have moral implications because students learn to act, rather than remaining passively on the receiving end of life.

As students learn to give form to their feelings, thoughts and perceptions, they may realize that they are no longer victims of circumstances beyond their control, and things can change for the better. Appreciating the pleasure of artistic creativity and the active engagement of personal moral agency is crucial in today's sedentary age of TV and computer games. Making a work of art is a pleasant, if challenging experience, where students learn to enjoy a richer quality of life. The imaginative shaping and grasping of the meaning of an aesthetically pleasing form is valuable, as Warnock argues, “for its own sake rather than a means to something else” (1994:172).

A work of art shares personal and cultural experience with others, and aesthetic appreciation of artistic form has the power to build communities through audience participation. Artistic enjoyment coordinates and attunes common feelings among
members of a group, in a unified aesthetic experience, which often expresses powerful cultural, political, or religious meaning. For the indigenous people of British Columbia, works of art in the form of masks and button blankets were a crucial aesthetic component of the communal gatherings. The painting in figure 12 entitled *The Great Divide* pays tribute to the traditional button blankets that the First Nations people use in their culture's ceremonies and rituals.

![Fig. 12 The Great Divide (1989)](image)

Similar to the masks, each blanket represents a family totem animal, which is hand appliquéd in uniquely flowing patterns and distinctive colours. This painting echoes the standard colours of red on a dark blue background, found on many blankets originating along the West Coast and the Fraser Valley. Further north, the colours of the blankets are more often bright yellow on a background of cerulean blue. However, the
flowing pattern and design of the clan’s totem animals is a common characteristic of both
types of blankets, regardless of where they were made.

As with Valley of the Masks, my intention here was not to imitate or expropriate
artistic form but to make reference to the significance of West Coast indigenous works of
art, and articulate my respect for the goodness of Canada’s native cultures. In addition,
this painting also honours the feminine nature of the mountainous landscape of British
Columbia. The title of this painting relates to an actual place deep in the Rockies where
the river separates and flows either west to the sea, or east towards the prairies in
Alberta and beyond. Furthermore, the unity of three sisters as landscape, articulates the
three-fold nature of feminine experience which was referred to earlier. The idea of three
sisters recurs over and over in my work, perhaps because it reflects the connective
relationship I have with my own two sisters.

I see blankets in general as a commonly understood artistic form because
blankets are used in every culture for utilitarian reasons as well as for ceremonial use.
People utilize blankets to comfort and protect their bodies from the cold, and blankets
bear witness to a person’s dreams, as well as to some of their most intimate secrets. My
aim in making this painting was to unite a particular artistic form, with a universally
understood aesthetic idea, anticipating that a viewer would intuitively understand the
complexity of its meaning. Although people may not be consciously aware of the cultural
meaning of the animal patterns used on the West Coast button blankets, on some level
artistic form speaks to everyone who takes the time for contemplative reflection.

It is the experiential nature of the arts in general, which facilitates the flexibility of
the imagination. Art students become increasingly aware of creative alternatives, as
they learn to imagine what is not yet. Imagining new aesthetic possibilities has the
power to move the mind beyond a sense of incompleteness, in order to perceive the unity of all human experience. Freedom to imagine a new fit between a concept and sensory intuition, opens up alternative ways of seeing and understanding the issues at hand.

Art studies in the classroom can assist in developing a flexible imagination so students can see beyond the obvious, and envision new possibilities of experience. Students may also learn to imagine a way out of their personal dilemmas by trusting that goodness will prevail, and to judge their own art work as well as others accordingly. Developing an accurate perception of today’s issues is often the first step in finding appropriate and creative solutions, as people learn to visualize where personal or cultural change may be necessary.

For millennia, the arts have functioned as a means of interpersonal cohesiveness and fellow feeling, providing the social cement within human society. People have bonded together in the movement of ethnic dance, and marched to the beat of the same drum. In sharing cultural origins and common aesthetic feelings and experience, every culture has benefited from the universal cohesive power inherent in the enjoyment and participation with a work of art. Historically, the arts across the globe have been effective in transmitting important cultural values as far as anyone can remember. Nothing can compare with the power of art to bind a community together, and encode cultural information.

By aesthetically engaging people’s feelings, emotions, perception, imagination and cognition all at once, cultural values are embedded more deeply into memory for easy future retrieval. It is this complex aesthetic engagement with a work of art on a cognitive, emotive and perceptual level, which makes it so valuable for acculturation.
The arts have traditionally been the preferred means of teaching important social values, and common understanding of morality within a human group. As Carroll argues, "culture, art, and human nature, in consequence, are indissolubly intertwined and will continue to be, unless and until evolution takes a radically unexpected turn" (2004:102).

In order to understand the power of the arts to broaden aesthetic perception and understanding, it may be useful to begin with an enquiry into the eighteenth century philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Kant was the first Western philosopher to understand the complexity of human cognition and that making good aesthetic judgments involves both intuitive feeling and the intellect. Kant's insight into the multi-layered nature of human rationality was unique for his time, and still holds true in many respects for contemporary philosophy, art and education because his unifying theory articulates a plausible explanation for the complexity of the human mind.
Kant’s aesthetic philosophy revolutionized Western philosophy during the eighteenth century because his theory of mind takes into account the complexity of human rationality. Although some would say that there are problems with Kant’s unifying aesthetic theory of mind, I believe his insight that different kinds of cognition are involved in aesthetic understanding remains relevant today. By ‘cognition’ I mean the mental process of acquiring knowledge through experience, by way of thought as well as the senses. Central to Kant’s aesthetic theory is that the power of the imagination brings unity between sensible intuition and intellectual understanding.

Unification between these two distinct and opposite kinds of knowledge results in harmony and reason in the mind. This imaginative unity brings a suitable concept or image into consciousness, making intuitive sensibility visible for greater understanding. For Kant, this mental harmony demonstrates the universality of general human concepts and aesthetic ideas. He understood that harmonious cognitive unity facilitates the ability to reason better in order to make good ethical and aesthetic judgments. I believe that Kant’s unifying aesthetic philosophy remains relevant for art education today because his theory of imaginative unity between distinct and opposite mental energies explains the complexity of human reasoning.

Kant’s unifying aesthetic philosophy

Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment is considered a major milestone in Western philosophy. His aesthetic philosophy reflects a turning point in the history of physics which challenged the predominant view that the earth is the centre of the universe. Warnock describes the history of Western philosophy as “pre Kantian” and “post Kantian”, because he overturns long held views that human knowledge comes from the
world outside. Just as Copernicus reversed the claim that the sun travels around the earth, Kant reversed the claim that the world gives its order to the human mind. Instead, as Lyas argues “the mind gives order to a world which has no structure save what the mind gives it” (1997:23).

Kant's great insight into aesthetic understanding is that two distinct and opposing cognitions are involved in the acquisition of knowledge, and require unification through an imaginative synthesis. The connective imagination is crucial for human reason and holistic understanding because it functions as a mental bridge between the senses and the intellect. Unification of intuitive feelings and emotions with an intellectual concept allows the mind to reason better and grasp the fundamental structure of reality more effectively. Kantian aesthetic philosophy is based on the idea that the imagination unifies sensibility and perception with a conceptual structure which it finds within the mind. As Lyas notes in reference to Kant, there has to be a distinction made between “something to which structure is to be given and something that gives the structure” (1997:24).

It is the mind that gives structure and order to human perception of reality, from the chaos of sensible intuition which bombard the senses. However, these sensible intuitions are not just arbitrary stimuli, because people see discrete things. “The organization of random stimuli into perceived objects” as Lyas notes, “is the work of the imagination and the production of conceptual categorizations of those objects is the work of understanding” (1997:24-25). The connective nature of the imagination unites two distinctly different types of cognition, so they can work together in the harmony of human reason.
Artistic creativity and the shaping of form also require an imaginative unity between sensible intuition and intellectual understanding. For example, the figurative shapes in the painting in figure 13 entitled *Motherhood* developed from the sensuousness of the medium in tandem with intuitive ideas which would enter my mind as I worked.

![Motherhood](image)

As form took shape, these ideas seemed to organize themselves under a general concept of a mother and her children. For me, this painting recalls some of Picasso's later paintings, where he stylized the female figure, depicting her as if seen from within...
and without simultaneously. Similarly, in this image, the mother figure to the right suggests an X-ray perspective, while the disembodied forms of the children seem to articulate the frustration of fragmentation and separation. However, there is also a note of hope in this painting because the sun shines brightly over the heads of the children in an energetic cerulean blue sky, as mother serenely watches over them.

Heavy bands of colour envelop the mother and her children, connecting these figures to each other as if in a protective womb. This womb-like structure was meant to suggest an iconic depiction; perhaps as a talisman for protecting absent loved ones. This image may also be interpreted on a more universal level as an infinitely recurring image of motherhood in general. A sympathetic viewer, who takes time to reflect on the many possible interpretations the artist may have consciously as well as unconsciously intended, should be able to grasp the complexity of underlying meaning behind artistic form.

The connective function of the imagination

If the imagination is given the freedom to play between sensible intuition and an indeterminate concept, the mind will create a harmonious order, which is necessary for rational understanding. By imagination I mean the cognitive ability to think in the subjunctive mode as if, making it possible to conceive of unusual and effective solutions within a particular context. The connective imagination is productive and formative, bringing sensibility and intuition together under a general concept found in the mind. By pulling different feelings and ideas together, the imagination usually discovers something new, or produces something unique and valuable.

The free play of the imagination takes both intuitive feeling and intellectual understanding into consideration, and actively connects these opposing mental abilities
in a more or less harmonious unity. When neither feelings nor the intellect dominate in
the mind, people are more able to reason and grasp the meaning of their perception of
things. "Free play between the imagination and understanding," as Guyer points out,
"satisfies [the mind's] need for unity by presenting a form that seems unitary and
coherent" (2007:1).

The power of the imagination to facilitate human reason is autonomous, and is
equally necessary mental ability, which is capable of uniting sensible intuition and
intellectual understanding. For Kant, there are three mental capacities which are distinct
yet necessary for understanding all possible experience. Although some analytic
philosophers have argued that the notion of Kant’s faculties of mind is untenable, for
others his perspective regarding the complexity of the human mind continues to
fascinate and inspire. I agree with Kant that human reason and understanding require
the cooperation between two distinctly different and conflicting mental abilities.
Therefore, I would suggest that Kant’s aesthetic philosophy remains a useful metaphor
for the unity of experience because it explains the complexity of the human mind.

For Kant there are two distinctly different aspects to the imagination, describing
them as being either empirical or a priori. The empirical imagination is the capacity
which fills the mind with visual images, whose details depend on personal experience.
For example, artistic form in many of my paintings makes reference to actual events in
my own life. In contrast, the a priori imagination is ‘given’ and is common to all rational
creatures. Time and space are the only pure a priori intuitions Kant believes are ‘given’
to human experience.

The a priori imagination can bring an aesthetic idea into form that other people
intuitively respond to on a more fundamental level of human understanding. It seems
that *a priori* images may be rooted in personal and cultural mythology, and these forms may appear spontaneously in the mind's eye during artistic creativity and the shaping of a work of art. For example, the painting in figure 14 entitled *Memories* depicts *a priori* form which is securely rooted in a long forgotten 'mythological' past.

Fig. 14 Memories [1990]
Imaginative free play brought many creative opportunities for expressive artistic form to mind that the fluid nature of the paint medium itself offers. I vaguely recall thinking about blood, as rusty red paint dripped over the gold enamel of the woman's face. This form triggered both personal as well as collectively shared memories of events and experience. As one colour was applied over another, many interesting associations popped into consciousness whose form continuously suggested fresh new aesthetic ideas and possibilities of self expression. During the art-making process, one thing leads to another as the imagination makes the cognitive and affective connections between past memories, and finds an appropriate image to express this newly found knowledge.

It seems that the imagination can be trusted to find a suitable visual image that can express previously unknown depths of knowledge found within the mind. If the imagination guides my thoughts, feelings and hands, there is usually something of value expressed in the aesthetic form of the finished art work. Imaginative unification between sensibility and the intellect produces an image, and brings this form into consciousness so a particular concept may be better understood. Making sensible intuition visible and therefore understandable develops the ability to make good aesthetic judgments about the meaning of objective experience. The imaginative connection of sensible intuition with an intellectual concept unites subject and object, mentally harmonizing the particular with the universal.

Intellectual understanding alone limits the ability to learn new things, because only the spontaneous free play of the productive imagination can extend human awareness, allowing consciousness to reach beyond the self. There is a delightful aesthetic tension in maintaining balance and harmony between intuitive sensibility and intellectual reason, only the imagination can reconcile. When the imagination succeeds
in harmonizing these oppositional mental capacities, it often brings with it a profound sense of awe and wonder. Most people take pleasure in their ability to reason and think about the infinite possibilities of human experience. Perhaps this is because the capacity to reason well liberates human consciousness from the limitations of personal and cultural horizons. I would suggest that the imaginative mental harmony between subjective sensibility and objective understanding of the unity of human experience is all the educational justification Kant’s aesthetic philosophy requires.

**The search for self-consciousness**

Unity and harmony between mental abilities provides a feeling of affinity and pleasure, bringing the realization that all knowledge is personal, yet also grounded in shared human concepts. As Greene argues, “the thought that the pursuit of knowledge is the pursuit of self-knowledge, was part of the non-philosophical legacy of Kant, who introduced the notion of the ‘I’ whose point of view unified the world of experience” (2000:26). Unification of opposite mental abilities by an act of the imagination, allows these conflicting cognitions to work harmoniously together, bringing out the best in both.

When these opposite and distinctly different mental capacities stand in contrast to each other, it produces a pleasurable tension, which is harmonized by an act of the imagination. Releasing the imagination gives the mind the freedom to search for a concept or appropriate visual image to express the meaning of personal and cultural events. Although all human experience of things in the objective world is subjectively perceived, it is understood according to general human concepts and applicable laws. These general concepts or aesthetic ideas are common to every human being, but are grasped differently because human understanding is determined by personal and cultural variation.
Sensible intuition and the intellect brought together by the cohesive imagination, forms the essential ground for the unique way each person perceives and interprets reality. When the active imagination discovers an appropriate form to articulate a personal perspective of general human values, it can then be shared with others. For example, the painting in figure 15 entitled *Transformation* demonstrates the imaginative search for an image, in order to bring a general concept into meaningful artistic form.

Fig. 15 Transformation [1990]

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As form appeared in the fluidity of colour and paint, these figures seemed to articulate an aesthetic idea concerning the nature of personal growth during the transformative process of art-making itself. The organic nature of form in this painting is indicative of the natural process of transformation inherent in all lived experience. The contrast between dark and light suggests the idea that positive as well as negative feelings and emotions need to be balanced with intellectual understanding. As Lyas observes, "synthesis confines the imagination to a general concept and makes things knowable and communicable" (1997:26). The human mind requires imaginative harmony in order to reason well, and grasp the meaning of form that has made thought and feelings visible and to some extent understandable.

Intuitive sensibility and intellectual understanding are equally important mental abilities that must be in balance for the mind to reason well. As Cohen and Guyer point out, "full understanding of the rational development of human capacities requires not the subordination of all feeling to understanding – or the reverse – but interaction between these capacities" (1983:7). It is important to remember that Kant's unifying cognitive philosophy went against philosophers from Plato to Hume, who all believed intellectual reason should dominate human feeling and the senses.

There is always a certain amount of tension involved when the imagination unites intuitive sensibility and intellectual understanding of personal and cultural meaning behind an artistic form. This cognitive tension feels like a push-pull effect between two old friends who don't like each other, but can't live without each other either. As Allison points out, these opposing mental capacities tend to "pull in opposite directions, the understanding toward universality and the imagination toward specificity" (2001:48). An imaginative synthesis arbitrates between these two opposite states of mind, in an attempt to bring harmony and a good cognitive fit between subjective intuitive sensibility,
and a visible image of a commonly understood concept. This imaginative synthesis makes thought and feeling communicable by finding an appropriate form to articulate an aesthetic idea. For example, artistic form in the painting in figure 15 entitled *The Burning Times* illustrates the anxiety of long forgotten world events which seem to reside deep within the human mind.

![The Burning Times](image)

Fig. 16 The Burning Times [1990]
This painting is a personal interpretation and response to Western culture’s misogynous history. The title refers to an actual time in history, when scores of women were accused as witches, and consequently burnt at the stake. This visual image recalls the fear of pain and death permeating much of Europe, when the Inquisition and the Roman Catholic Church tried to suppress women in general, and the old pagan nature religion in particular.

Bringing this aesthetic idea into form felt like an act of at-one-ment, because the implications of the truth this image made visible could then be rationally reflected upon. There is a pleasant tension between the lusciousness of colour and texture of the painted surface, and the jagged anxiety of the figures, perhaps suggesting a certain ambivalence concerning the implied meaning of this image. However, the title reinforces this aesthetic idea by making direct reference to actual historical events that had tremendous influence on the treatment of women for many centuries to come.

When a particular visual image fits under a general concept or rule, the various mental capacities are working smoothly together. Allison describes this mental harmony as “well-meshed gears with little friction and the subsumption accordingly proceeds without difficulty” (2001:48). Harmonious unity between these distinct and opposite cognitive states energizes human comprehension, enabling the intellect to grasp the meaning of general aesthetic and ethical values. This aesthetic understanding serves to inspire the imagination to exhibit itself as fully as possible. The active imagination serves to enhance this reciprocal relationship in the mind in determining the meaning of objective form. Furthermore, this imaginative synthesis is facilitated through the interplay between the different mental abilities, allowing them to interact, as Allison points out, so they “reciprocally enhance one another’s activity” (2001:47).
The universality of aesthetic judgment

Free play between sensible intuition and the intellect allows the imagination to unite them, in order to better understand the meaning of experience and make a valid aesthetic judgment. The aesthetic understanding of artistic form provides a special kind of satisfaction, which is different from the fulfillment of personal desires. Aesthetic comprehension and enjoyment provides its own intrinsic reward, which satisfies for its own sake. I believe aesthetic understanding is whole in itself because its goal is internal and always authentic. There is a 'disinterested' pleasure in grasping the meaning of an authentic aesthetic experience that must be enjoyed for its own sake, and not for any instrumental value. By disinterested I mean the state of being impartial and a person's aesthetic judgment is not influenced by personal feelings or desires.

Making a disinterested aesthetic judgment is an intensely pleasurable experience because the imagination has been released to roam free between intuitive sensibility and intellectual understanding. This imaginative free play within the mind provides a powerful cognitive delight when artistic form is disinterestedly enjoyed, and aesthetically understood. The imagination brings sensory input under a general objective concept in much the same way a painter imposes order and aesthetic understanding on the chaos of colour, texture and form of the medium.

For example, the painting in figure 17 entitled The Other illustrates what I mean by a painter imposing order onto sensory chaos by means of finding an appropriate artistic form to describe an aesthetic idea. The figures in this painting intuitively emerged from the colour and paint, one shape coming out of another. As the paint was moved about, aesthetic meaning began to take shape in my mind that was driven by artistic creativity and the art-making process itself. It seems as if the mind reorders lived
experience, and by making thought and feelings visible, artistic form articulates an important personal and cultural truth. The meaning of this painting may be interpreted on many different levels, but for me, the biblical story of Jacob wrestling with an angel comes to mind.

Fig. 17 The Other [1990]
Perhaps on one level, these two figures represent the universal tension between individual needs and the general demands of the culture. Animal forms dominate one half of the canvas as a visual metaphor for the animal passions, as the woman turns her back on the puzzled curiosity of the man. This image in particular seems to reach back deep into personal memories of a long forgotten past, by bringing these suppressed yet intuitively recognized feelings into a fresh new context and aesthetic form. On a broader level, artistic form in this painting expresses the oppositional relationship of both apprehension and attraction between masculine and feminine energies. However, the energizing tension between these two figures has to be reconciled by an act of the imagination.

Bringing a general concept of an aesthetic idea into innovative artistic form balances intuitive feelings and the intellect, as the mind finds reason and aesthetic understanding. If the imagination is free to play between sensible intuition and intellectual reason, a valuable personal learning experience will often be embedded in the art work for everyone to see. Artistic form then often becomes a visual image of the unity of human experience.

When distinct yet equally important cognitive and affective energies are brought into artistic form, the different levels of personal and cultural meaning can then be intelligently comprehended. Simply by attending to what an art object looks like in a disinterested way, the imagination makes the necessary connections for grasping if only partially, the meaning of what has been expressed. Meaningful aesthetic understanding demonstrates that people do not passively perceive their world, but actively engage their minds, in order to make the necessary cognitive links.
However, all human perception and aesthetic understanding will be interpreted subjectively because different personal expectations; memories, cultural background and individual psychology will all come into play. But disinterested and sympathetic attention to artistic form provides the intellectual freedom from the mundane pressures of daily life in order to reflectively contemplate artistic form, whether it is in a painting, a concert or a theatrical play. It seems as if for the time being, all worries and obligations are put aside to pay attention and enjoy a work of art for no other reason than for its own sake. Paying attention only to form in the art work itself, and contemplating it imaginatively by entering into the world of the artist frees the mind, allowing it the pleasure to weave imaginings in a controlled manner.

Noticing the details and complexity of expressive aesthetic qualities is what matters, not the issues of what monetary or moral value a work of art may have. Ulterior concerns should have no influence on viewers, as they surrender themselves to attending to the object's beauty, unity of form and the art work's expressive intensity. Aesthetic enjoyment and understanding involves letting go and attending to the meaning of the art work's formal structure. Sympathetic aesthetic attention, as Carroll argues, "presupposes playing by the artwork's own rules, rather than importing our own" (2000:195). Attending with empathy requires following the subtle suggestions and implied visual metaphors which the imagination discovers and makes explicit in artistic form. Empathetic attention to aesthetic form shows that the expressive purpose of an art object is more important than personal mental or physical states.

However, sometimes artistic form may also shock, as the imagination discovers an image which expresses deeply suppressed feelings and intuition. For example, the painting in figure 18 entitled Kali's Feast illustrates what I mean by the imaginative expression of repressed thoughts and feeling in an artistic form. Form in this painting

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makes personal thoughts and feeling tangible in the patterns of agitated brush strokes and acrid colour.

Fig. 18 Kali's Feast [1991]

Inspired by an actual political event, this image intends to express a critique of globalized aggression, greed and war. In this painting Kali, the goddess of war and destruction mentioned earlier, is feasting on the blood and bodies of the dead, as she
sits on what appears to be a bomb. Sharp jagged shapes and aggressive scratches of paint on the canvas intentionally articulate my disgust at the mindless destruction and hatred of yet another confrontation between opposite ideologies. Hovering over Kali's left shoulder hangs a blue moon, an ancient feminine symbol representing profound sadness and despair. On a more personal level this painting articulates suppressed thoughts and a deep feeling of despair during a time when my mother lay dying, and my second marriage was rapidly disintegrating.

It was a time of personal and collective chaos when it seemed that the world, and certainly my world was about to enter into a frightening abyss. However, once these feelings of fear and anger had been brought into visual form, it provided meaningful understanding of the universal human dilemma. By making thought and feeling visible, the complexity of meaning could then be rationally interpreted on a personal, as well as cultural level. For me, aesthetic understanding of form expressed in this painting provides a broader perception of life experience, viewed in a global context. Aesthetic delight arises when the imagination has brought harmony to the mind, which often has tremendous personal and collective power.

Aesthetic delight seems to be a particular and subjective pleasure that is also a common and shared human value. When mental abilities are in relative harmony, it demonstrates the universal validity of aesthetic perception and understanding. As Kant so eloquently states in the Critique of Judgment, understanding an aesthetic idea, "enlivens the mind [and] stimulates the imagination [to] think more than can be comprehended in a concept or definite form of words" (1974:156). The aesthetic comprehension of meaningful artistic form serves to balance and strengthen cognitive and affective abilities, inspiring the mind to think and reason better.
Aesthetic delight can be found in the beauty of nature, in music or the rapture of
dance, but it is the human mind that actively shapes what is experienced. As Lyas
states, "in these moments it is as if we rise transfigured from the deadness of our
habitual lives. And we have, too, the promise of the continual possibility of such spiritual
renewal. That, indeed, is an experience of rapture offered by the greatest art" (1997:31).
However, I would suggest that artistic creativity itself is also an intense experience of
rapture, cleansing the artist's thoughts, feelings and intuition concerning personal and
world events by articulating them in artistic form.

Most cultures in the world celebrate and create works of art; some people write
narrative, while others tell stories or make visual images from clay, stone or paint. Cross
culturally and at different times all over the world, archeologists discover aesthetically
pleasing form in paintings, carvings or sculpture, and many people dance, sing and act
out their cultural myths. Artistic creativity and the sharing of works of art seem to be a
common human activity that developed independently in various places and times
across the globe. The apparent universality of aesthetic experience may explain why
people are able to appreciate and understand the art work made in other cultures,
despite the different context and availability of materials, and artistic adaptations.

Although aesthetic response to works of art seems to be a universal human
phenomenon, it should be noted that artistic expression takes many different forms from
one place to another. Whereas Western culture puts the emphasis on disinterested
contemplation of art works, other societies perceive the arts in more pragmatic terms.
The Western conception of art as a source of aesthetic pleasure valued for its own sake
stands in stark contrast to many cultures, where art expresses religious or political
values. However, the Western conception of disinterested contemplation of artistic form
is a relatively recent cultural development. The arts including architecture prior to the
eighteenth century, served a more utilitarian purpose. One need only think of the magnificence of the Vatican in Rome, or the great European cathedrals to recall a time when art was used to teach spiritual reverence and the principles of morality to the illiterate masses.

Although people may not be aware of the specific details or intended use of many of the great historical works of art, it seems aesthetic understanding of the grandeur of the Vatican or Chartres is intuitively understood by most everyone all the same. Artistic form seems to be able to speak in a commonly understood language that needs no explanation. Europeans who have no knowledge of Greek mythology or West Coast native art for example, are usually able to appreciate the aesthetic value of its artistic form, when they see an ancient statue of Zeus or a magnificent Haida totem pole.

Aesthetic appreciation may only be limited by a lack of knowledge concerning the depth of cultural and historical value that a work of art articulates. Therefore, artistic form must always be understood in context to where and when it was made. Even so, it is amazing that most people recognize and respond aesthetically to art work made in other cultures, although its personal, cultural and historical significance may never be fully understood. It may be that cross-cultural recognition of the aesthetic significance of artistic form is part of human nature.

Cross-cultural aesthetic recognition of art may also be related as Carroll argues, to the “human capacity for language” (2004:96). However, form speaks a language all its own which goes beyond mere words and text. For example, the painting in figure 19 entitled The Goddess Remembered articulates a growing serenity and acceptance of personal and cultural limitations. Although painted around the same time as Kali’s Feast, this painting depicts the ancient goddess in repose, as if asleep. The Venus of
Willendorf in stylized form makes an appearance in the background, perhaps in support of the women whose faces display quiet contemplation and respectful reverence for the prostrate feminine figure.

Western art has a long history of the reclining female nude, however this image represents her upside down, reminiscent of a contemporary Bazelitz painting. The
goddess' elongated pose seems restful and at ease, as she smiles contently with her eyes closed as if in a dream. This image makes me think of St. Peter who insisted he be crucified upside down, because he felt unworthy to die like his master. However, here she may also be hanging upside down because of the continuous chaos of personal and cultural events in the world at large. But the expression of anger and conflict inherent in Kali's Feast has been replaced by a sense of quiet serenity. A reassuring sense of acceptance seems to have crept into this painting, telling me once again that progress has been made.

The sandstone colour in this painting was also intended to express the beauty of the New Mexico and Arizona landscape where I had the good fortune to be able to spend a few weeks. My paintings were on exhibit in a gallery in Phoenix and after the opening, I rented a car and set off to explore the 'four comers' area of the American South West. The gallery opening had been an extraordinary celebration of the power of art to speak across personal and cultural difference. The next few weeks became an odyssey of personal transformation filled with many aesthetic encounters of both ancient and contemporary works of art.

Traveling through vast deserts and reservations, I learned about the cultural history and art-making practices of the Navaho and Hopi people. I also enjoyed the beauty and spiritual symbolism of the wax covered religious sculptures of saints found in the Spanish mission churches that have stood for hundreds of years in this part of the world. While standing on top of a mountain south of Phoenix overlooking the city, it occurred to me that life would never be quite the same again. This painting embodies this personal feeling of empowerment in the colours of the architecture and landscape of the American South West.
Although a casual viewer might not know the personal details and aesthetic reasons behind artistic form, on some level these different meanings may be grasped, if only in part. However, not every art work is cross-culturally recognized, and some works of art are not even recognized as art by all members of the same culture; Duchamp’s ready-mades for example. Most contemporary artists, historians and philosophers consider Duchamp’s ready-made sculptures to be valuable works of art, however many lay people do not agree. It is often the manner in which these art works are displayed; in the context of art museums that raises them to the status of art.

Aesthetic understanding of artistic form, including Duchamp’s ready-mades involves an attitude of empathy, and a sincere effort to see beauty in patterns and in its expressive qualities. Distinguishing the unique patterns of artistic form is an important mental capacity, because it creates order from random perceptual and sensory stimuli which constantly impinge on the human mind. For example, Lyas describes a Turner painting as a series of sensory perceptions of nature which, having entered the artist’s perception, the imagination has brought into aesthetic form.

Making sensory perception of an aesthetic idea visible delights not only the eye, but also creates harmony in the mind. In the painting Goldau for example, Turner embodies his perception of a beautiful sunset in artistic form and shares it with others so they can imagine having seen this sunset as the artist once saw it. In this painting, Turner imposed a unique and subjective order on the chaos of random stimuli, which impinged on his perception of a sunset. Then his imagination created a sensuous and rational likeness which is recognized as a good and true image of the beauty of a sunset, which speaks to everyone who appreciates its visual effect.
To illustrate what Lyas is talking about, take for example the forms in the painting in figure 20 entitled *Mediterranean Goddess*.

Artistic form in this painting was inspired by an ancient archeological discovery in Greece, of a wall carving depicting a sacred feminine image of a local goddess. The woman holds palm leaves in her hands as if in benediction, as she seems to be blessing...
the two bearded goats while she averts her eyes from the viewer. I remember how much fun it was to paint her skirt, and I like the sense of playful celebration this painting seems to embody. Bare-breasted and proudly female, this visual image looks back to the ancient past for contemporary inspiration.

This painting may be interpreted and understood on many different cognitive and affective levels, if viewers reflect on what this artistic form may mean. The imagination is inspired to find rational understanding in the beautiful pattern of a snowflake, as well as in a painting whose meaning the intellect alone can never find. As Lyas points out, "what goes for the contemplation of paintings goes for the contemplation of natural objects" (1997:29). Aesthetic perception and understanding of a visual image, of a sunset for example, inspires reason and ideas that can only be articulated in a visual image, in order to be clearly understood.

Quiet contemplation is an aesthetic delight which opens viewers' eyes as well as their mind, in order to reach beyond the obvious. Lyas wonders, "what the mind must be like to make that sort of delight possible and why that pleasure and delight is so important to us" (1997:25-28). I believe that people feel pleasure and satisfaction when they see and contemplate aesthetic form because their mental powers have been purposively exercised. Unstudied reflection and the free play of the productive imagination, while reflecting on the beauty of an aesthetic object is, as Kant points out, "always new to us, and one does not get tired of looking at it" (1974:80).

The link between ethics and aesthetics

Artistic creativity is a purposive act of mind, yet seems at the same time to be free from constraints and rules, as if form was created by nature itself. But a work of art is never a mere imitation of nature, nor does an artist follow a set of rules which can be
taught. I think that the natural quality of artistic form may result from the imagination's freedom to discover a conceptual fit, rather than having a predetermined concept imposed. Only when a concept presents itself spontaneously to consciousness can artistic form be fully understood. For example, artistic form in the painting in figure 21 entitled *Paradise Lost*, articulates a personal event in terms of the Old Testament story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden.
This well known biblical myth is found in *Genesis*, and it has inspired many paintings, sculptures and literature over the centuries. This ancient story also has its darker side because it became a reason for Western culture's misogyny and hatred of women. The colour and brushwork in this painting suggests unhappiness and loss, as the two figures turn away from the dark form in the background who might be an archangel standing guard at the garden gates.

Again, there are complex layers of interpretation concerning this painting's artistic form, because it articulates aesthetic ideas whose meaning may be comprehended on many different personal and cultural levels. On a more personal level, this painting expresses the slow disintegration of a relationship that had died long ago. In addition, the predominant use of dark blue reinforces the general sense of defeat this image seems to articulate. The pleasure of practicing art-making and aesthetic appreciation is produced by a feeling of harmonious unity between the mental abilities, when the mind spontaneously grasps the art form's meaning.

For me, a painting is a visual image of an aesthetic idea about personal as well as cultural experience that the mind reworks into an original new artistic form. Artistic creativity is an attempt to express this idea in context of a general concept and form that sometimes surpass the limits of personal knowledge. The evaluation of a work of art requires that a viewer has the imagination to strike a balance between the aesthetic requirements of form and content, and try to grasp what this image means in context with the artist's intention.

Genuine works of art are always original and do not depend on the judgment of others for their production, nor can an artist always describe how she came by an image which originates within the mind. Nor can the mental processes of artistic creativity be
duplicated at a later date, nor fully articulated in any other form. For example, the figures in the painting in figure 22 entitled *Temptation* embody these abstract aesthetic ideas, making them visible by expressing them in artistic form.

![Temptation (1992)](image)

**Fig. 22** Temptation [1992]

The overall structure of this image plays with the idea of opposition and duality between light and dark, as well as goodness and evil, by splitting the canvas almost in half. The left represents the warm feminine side of sensibility and intuition, while the
right side suggests the cool intellectualism of the masculine. The brightness of the female figure suggests joy and love, in contrast to the nocturnal masculine figure, which seems to suggest the darker side of human temptation. In the background, a devilish figure watches the two figures, as the male seems to push the dancing woman forward towards the light.

After all these years, there still remain unknown yet tantalizing psychological suggestions in this painting as well as in many others, whose meaning I don’t fully understand. It may be this mysterious prompting by the imagination that makes these images perennially interesting. Sometimes it may take years before the many levels of meaning become clear, and can then be rationally articulated to some extent.

This painting also illustrates a return of the light after a particularly sorrowful time in my life. For me, artistic form in a painting seems to be a barometer of psychological states, whose meaning only becomes clearer as the work progresses, because it develops in context with corresponding aesthetic ideas that occur during the art-making process itself. This painting still pleases me because this image was an affirmation that the healing process had begun, and things would soon become better.

The painting’s colour and texture was the result of a new technique that I was experimenting with, where the cement floor in the studio became an integral part of the painting process. As usual fluid paint was poured on a flat canvas and manipulated on the ground using only my hands. I had been working that way for a few years, and liked the development of form, which the colour and paint itself suggests when it was dry. But this time the wet canvas was pulled up and reversed face down on the cement floor and left to dry.
This newly discovered technique was also used in the painting in figure 23 entitled *Ritual* which depicts a group of women who have gathered together in a communal celebration.

Some of the women have drums and they appear to be singing, while others lie or sit, simply enjoying the sight of the dancing women. The women’s faces have no particular features, because they represent all women across time and place, who have gathered in groups to celebrate the seasons of the year, and the cycles of life. These
traditional celebrations were intended to renew and regenerate the fertility of the people, as well as the land. It seems to me that intense attention to colour, texture and form, in a work of art as well as in nature, often leads to further thought and reflection on the value of the morally good for the community.

This innovative painting technique creates the most remarkable colours and texture, because some of the paint would stick to the cement, and bits of cement remained stuck on the canvas. I liked the 'natural' look a painting takes on; its texture seemed somewhat like the surface of rock. This unusual texture reminds me of the ancient cave paintings in Lascaux, as well as the Anasazi rock paintings of the Navaho and Hopi in the American South West. It reminds me that people all over the world have left their aesthetic mark on rock or the landscape in one way or another since anyone can remember.

As Lyas points out, artistic form speaks eloquently through a "wealth of images that enrich our conception [and] only the active imagination can thus sensuously embody these abstract ideas" (1997:32). The imagination is capable of expressing these intellectual ideas, which enables the mind to reason about such abstract notions as peace and justice for all. Viewers who have a subjective disposition for aesthetic understanding often feel an expanded capacity of affection for all humanity. Therefore, understanding of form may further the moral qualities of virtue, honour, sympathy and friendliness towards others in the community.

Aesthetic understanding of an expression of subjective thought and feeling presupposes the awareness that common principles of affection for humanity are the ground of all virtue and morality. As Crowther argues, "true virtue [is] acting according to these universal principles regardless of our spontaneous impulse for self preservation"
The painting in figure 24 entitled *Lughnasadh* shows what Crowther means by seeing and understanding artistic form in light of a general affection for humanity.

For me, the ancient mythologies of Europe articulate a generous affection for humanity which seems to be hard-wired in human consciousness. The ancient Greeks articulated this affection in the context of living a happy and balanced life within a community which is embedded in a particular landscape. These ancient myths speak
of personal and collective duties and obligations in these shared communal celebrations of the seasons and cycles of life.

The title of this painting refers to one of the four main seasonal festivals of the ancient European calendar. The celebration of Lughnasadh is a midsummer festival when people gave thanks for the ripening of the first fruits in early August. Traditionally, it was a time of community gatherings, market festivals and family reunions. The festivities at Lughnasadh were also a time for weddings, because the abundance of flowers and vegetables in the summer gardens could feed many friends and relatives.

However, this painting also suggests another part of the myth; that of the barley king's demise. While this feast takes place in mid summer, there is already a vague sense of impending death and the coming winter, in gathering the early harvest. In this painting, this indeterminate suggestion of death and decay may be felt in the prostrate figure representing the barley king, who dies each year to feed the people, but comes to life again each spring.

This interpretation seems to fit better with the qualitative stillness of this image, and the subdued colours also seem to imply a sense of pathos and loss. Artistic creativity develops the ability to perceive and comprehend the inherent meaning of form, inspiring the mind to reach beyond what it knows. Strengthening aesthetic perception and understanding provides unity and wholeness in the mind which, as Taylor argues, goes "beyond the divisions that arise in us from the struggle between morality and desire that is good and satisfying in itself" (1991:65).

Aesthetic perception and understanding the complex nature of meaningful artistic form has a long cultural history. The following chapter will pursue the development of
aesthetic understanding in relation to European painting and the advent of modernity. Beginning in the early Renaissance, European painting dominated the art world and the aesthetic language of painting remained unchallenged until the second half of the twentieth century.
CHAPTER THREE
MODERNITY: A NEW AESTHETIC UNDERSTANDING

Traditionally, many works of art were perceived and aesthetically understood as visual images of a culture’s sacred mythology. Artistic form was considered to be part of society’s magical rituals that were usually performed in hidden caves or forest groves, away from everyday life. Many centuries later, works of art were increasingly made for display inside temples, cathedrals, mosques and churches. By Kant’s day, the arts had lost most of their common social as well as sacred meaning, as art-making increasingly becomes a visual articulation of the artist’s thoughts and feelings. Consequently, a new aesthetic language was required to explain the meaning and authenticity of an artistic expression of self discovery.

During the Renaissance, early European oil painting became visual expression of the advent of modernity in images that showed the opulence of a new capitalist society. Oil paint was extraordinary in its ability to describe the secular wealth of the bourgeoisie, as church demands for paintings of the spiritual and divine diminished. Artists such as Frans Hals revolutionized European painting, by making art work as a personal statement of aesthetic ideas found in the mind. Over several centuries, a new aesthetic language of art was developed, culminating in the *plein air* Impressionist paintings of the twentieth century.

The cultural heritage of aesthetic understanding

The arts across time and place have played an integral part in a culture’s traditional heritage, as works of art brought the sacred myths and rituals into a commonly understood artistic form. Many works of art were used or performed during special communal rituals which were not part of the everyday life of the community. Therefore these gatherings were usually presented in ancient forest groves, or in the
bowels of a hidden cave. As time went on, these sacred rituals became institutionalized, and more and more works of art were moved inside temples, mosques, cathedrals and churches.

However, with the demise of the church in the West and the advent of secularism, the production and exhibition of art works is increasingly controlled by a complex ‘art world’ of art museums and galleries. This vast art network includes not only museums and art galleries, but also the art schools and concert halls. In addition, as Lyas states, this ‘art world’ also includes, “the institutions for trading art, collecting art, studying its history, restoring and commissioning it” (1997:90).

A thriving business has sprung up around the production, exhibition and the enjoyment of art, which even includes the ‘often baffling new art’ of the avant-garde. The question of who decides whether an art work is valued as ‘art’ or not will depend on the acceptance of art experts and the institutional art world. If an art work is accepted by a gallery as well as the art critics, it generally means that the status of ‘art’ has been conferred on the art object. However, a full aesthetic understanding of the meaning behind the expression of aesthetic ideas, often seem to have little to do with this decision.

The painting in figure 25 entitled Artemis, illustrates what I mean by the necessity for viewers to have a full aesthetic understanding of the meaning behind what an art work has articulated. Artistic form in this painting was inspired by the ancient Greek myth of Artemis, the goddess who protects the wilderness, as well as the hunt. Traditionally, Artemis was often depicted carrying a bow and arrow but in this painting she is unarmed. A snake coils around her arm, and in her right hand she holds a white bird, perhaps a dove. The only suggestion of the hunt is a deer-skin draped over her
shoulders, but the overall feeling in this painting is one of peace and tranquility. Perhaps this sense of peacefulness reflects another aspect of Artemis, who was also venerated as the goddess of healing who protects women during childbirth.

Paradoxically, Artemis also represents purity and chastity because her father Zeus bestowed on her eternal virginity. Although she is usually represented with a crescent moon above her forehead, this painting makes only an abstract reference to the
light of the moon in the background behind her head. Since before the ancient Greeks, works of art have had the power to move participants to feel awe and wonder at the beauty of artistic form. Traditionally, works of art were linked to personal and cultural memory, as well as being a visual imitation of objects and nature. As Lyas points out, "pictorial representation [links] art with imitation, representation, or, using a Greek term, mimesis" (1997:37).

For Plato, a work of art was merely a second-hand imitation of natural objects, and he dismissed the arts as being inferior to reality. As Lyas states, for Plato a work of art "is a copy, and as such always suspect, being a misleading and deceitful derivation from a true original, this being something existing in some transcendent world" (1997:40). Plato describes ideal form of a chair for example, as existing in another realm, the wooden chair being only a copy. Therefore, he argued, a painting of a chair is but a third-rate copy of a copy. For the ancient Greeks, a work of art would always remain an inferior imitation of the world, and a dim shadow far removed from the objects in nature.

However, Plato’s conception of artistic form as an inferior imitation of experience is, as Lyas points out, "quite useless as a general account of art, because so little in art has to do with imitation i.e. actors do not imitate characters, they inhabit them" (1997:38-39). Moreover, seeing a work of art as an inferior copy of natural objects doesn’t begin to explain authentic aesthetic understanding of artistic form. For one thing, it negates the artist’s imaginative search for creative ‘goodness’ and authenticity. If the imagination has been able to balance sensible intuition with intellectual understanding, a work of art is never just an inferior copy of the world, but a new and unique expression of perception and meaning of experience.
However, not all art work is experienced perceptually, nor aesthetically grasped through the senses. John Cage’s art work 4’33” for example, consists of four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence, which he describes as ‘silent music’ and an act of artistic anarchy. But is it art? I would say, yes, of course it is art because the work successfully articulates an aesthetic idea which is understandable. Four minutes and thirty-three seconds of nothingness makes a strong expressive artistic statement concerning the value of silence. Aesthetic understanding requires taking time to think about the many levels of meaning that artistic form may imply. Cage asks viewers to approach this art work with an empathetic open mind and an active imagination, so the mind can grasp what this artistic form is silently articulating.

Reflective attention to a painted image for example, does not mean seeing only the splotches of colour on a two-dimensional surface, but it also involves seeing the subtle variations of colour, texture and form. It is difficult, if not impossible for a painting to represent only the two-dimensional flat surface of the canvas because every nuance in colour and texture suggests the potential for artistic form in a three-dimensional space. Most people, as Lyas explains, "see something in something and thus [they] see a representation" (1997:52). It is one of the strengths of the painted image that the human mind is able to create three-dimensional form from splotches of colour and texture on a two-dimensional surface.

But some would say that the advent of photography has made the art of painting obsolete because a photo can represent form better, and the issue of representation in a work of art may be irrelevant. But at what cost, Lyas asks, “what would we lose if we lost representation from art?” (1997:53). I would suggest that representational form in a painting is very different from a photograph because the image articulates an aesthetic idea which goes far beyond mere documentation of the world. For example, artistic form
in the painting in figure 26 entitled *Aboriginal Cave Goddesses* articulates an aesthetic idea whose meaning is much broader than merely representing reality.

![Aboriginal Cave Goddesses](image)

This painting was inspired by ancient Australian wall paintings and is intended to show the interconnectedness between past and present artistic form. Although having
seen archaeological photographs of these ancient rock paintings, these feminine figures spontaneously sprung into my mind during the art-making process, as hands, eyes and mind harmoniously worked together. Similar to many other paintings, this painting embodies many levels of personal and cultural meaning, if a viewer takes time to attend and reflect on its artistic form.

During the eighteenth century, a cultural shift in aesthetic thinking occurred and works of art were no longer interpreted as social and cultural representations of reality, but as individual, creative acts of authentic self expression. Kant’s aesthetic philosophy parallels this cultural shift in the understanding of artistic form, not as something given by the objects in the world, but as an expression of form found within the mind. With this new aesthetic attitude, it seems that the language of art lost the common reference points that artists as well as viewers could traditionally draw upon in order to understand artistic meaning.

This change in seeing the meaning of artistic form, not as an imitation of nature but as a product of artistic self expression, reflects the culture in which art was made. It bears testimony to the fact that by the end of the eighteenth century, long-standing intellectual, spiritual and historical assumptions were being challenged across Europe. Taylor argues that the “Christian interpretation of history, sacramental nature, the Great Chain of Being [and] conception of man as microcosm was public domain” (1991:85). Accordingly, artists were encouraged to seek an original vision of the world, and express these ideas in a new aesthetic language.

**Modernity and the search for self consciousness**

Modernist aesthetic philosophy reflects a far broader view of what artistic form is meant to represent. As Beardsley points out, this new aesthetic perspective includes,
"any perceptual or intentional object that is deliberately regarded from the aesthetic point of view [including] looking, listening, reading, and similar acts of attention" (1982:19).

Attention to the art work's formal properties, its shape and colour for example, arouses complex and valuable feelings and sensations of aesthetic enjoyment, which is an experience worth having for its own sake alone.

Aesthetic pleasure can be found in the particular sound of a musical score which may be especially satisfying to the ear, or in the visual pleasure of seeing the unity and harmony of colour and form in a painting. The aesthetic value of a work of art seems to be linked to the intensity of pleasure in the experience of contemplating it "under optimal circumstances" as Beardsley describes it (1982:22-23). I understand Beardsley to mean by the contemplation under 'optimal circumstances' something similar to what Kant meant when he argues for the necessity of 'disinterested' contemplation of artistic form.

The various elements of colour, texture or sound in a work of art have the power to shape thoughts and feelings which influence the aesthetic response of a viewer, reader or listener. These aesthetic elements or qualities inherent in a work of art determine the comprehension of often complex meaning. As Lyas points out, "we must be true to what is in the work; the mind of the artist is there in the work as much as any word, sound or colour patch" (1997:155). Every element in a work of art speaks of an artist's search for self expression, and the various aesthetic elements are intrinsically interconnected, pulling the work together, in order that the many layers of meaning can to some extent be grasped.

Although the painting in figure 27 entitled Cretan Goddess does not push any conceptual boundaries, this image does incorporate the imaginative use of traditional
artistic form in a new way. Similar to previous art work, this painting was also inspired by ancient photographs of archaeological discoveries in Crete.

Fig. 27. Cretan Goddess [1992]

In this painting, artistic form from ancient works of art was juxtaposed on the canvas, in order to articulate a new vision of an old mythological story. The images of snakes and fish suggest not only ancient Cretan mythology, but also Old Testament
stories and their social implications. Snakes periodically shed their skin, and for that reason they have long been associated with spiritual rebirth, and the regeneration of nature. The fish form reminds me of the biblical image of Jesus, as ‘fisher of men’, as well as the medieval legend of the Grail, and the mortally wounded fisher king. However, this feminine figure has a heart shaped face, symbolizing love and protection as she stands firmly rooted, holding in her hands two snakes, similar to certain ancient Athenian Kore statues. In the background the energetic blue half of the canvas suggests a body of water, perhaps representative of the ocean of knowledge, and the sunlit sky may be understood as representing the light of reason.

These expressive elements articulate both conscious and unconscious qualities that an artist may have intentionally displayed in a work of art. Viewers are asked to make an effort to respond sympathetically to these aesthetic elements, by identifying with the speaker in the work. Aesthetic understanding requires paying disinterested attention, making a conscious effort to detach temporarily from the demands of the real world, and allowing the imagination to engage with artistic form. This detached engagement, allows the mind to imaginatively focus on the meaning of the ‘picture-figure’ image in a controlled manner.

However, some contemporary art does not give the viewer a ‘picture-figure’ to contemplate, for example Claes Oldenburg’s ‘invisible sculpture’ behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Oldenburg’s site-specific installation consists of digging a grave-size hole, and refilled it again with earth. Oldenburg describes this art work as a conceptual ‘underground sculpture’, and viewers are asked to visualize it as loosened dirt from a particular section of Central Park. Once the hole was refilled it could no longer be visibly perceived, however Oldenburg’s conceptual sculpture is nonetheless part of the New York landscape. This work of art intentionally bypasses viewers’ perceptual sensibilities,
and its meaning can only be imaginatively understood by reflective and mindful contemplation.

Conceptual artists are influenced by modernist art movements such as Dada, who challenged long held assumptions about what a work of art actually is. Dadaists like Duchamp suggest a work of art is not just a visual experience of the senses, but artistic expression can be anything at all. Oldenburg’s work pushes the boundaries of what artistic form is by saying an underground sculpture which can’t be seen, is as valid as one you can. Be that as it may, it appears that today anything is considered to be a work of art if the artist intends it to be seen as art, even if the art work itself can’t actually be perceived as such.

Sometimes a work of art may articulate a personal revelation which gives viewers a sense that they already knew what the artist is trying to communicate. Aesthetically, feeling the ‘rightness’ of artistic form may open a viewer’s consciousness, making them aware of new possibilities in the everyday experience of their life. As Lyas points out, “on the one hand we feel something has been revealed to us: yet, on the other, we also feel we already knew it” (1997:202). A work of art is often valued for the way artistic form makes us aware by bringing a cherished idea or image of something only vaguely remembered into consciousness. Sometimes, it seems a particular artistic form perfectly and explicitly articulates something valuable that was already implicitly known to be true.

For example, for many people artistic form in the painting in figure 28 entitled *Sisters* articulates a cherished memory of childhood and the friendship between sisters. This painting articulates my thoughts and feelings about familial human relationships, especially between siblings, which most people can easily respond to. The simplicity of form in this painting speaks of the close relationship between sisters, yet there is also
tension in the gestures of these women. There is an expression of anxiety, even fear expressed in these forms which nudges my conscious awareness, expressing both personal and cultural issues.

Fig. 28 Sisters [1998]

It seems that the meaning of artistic form may be understood on many different levels, if the imagination is able to unite both conscious and unconscious human experience. For example, viewers may perceive a Turner painting of a sunset as uniquely 'Turneresque' because they recognize the commonality of the artist's perception with their own world view. Viewers project their personal experience onto an external image in order to comprehend its meaning, in an effort to restore cognitive order and rationality to what has been perceived. Works of art, as Lyas points out,
“impose order onto those internal lives [w]hat could be more important than this? And what, if not art, is to do it?” (1997:203).

However, aesthetic perception and understanding the intended meaning of many works of art will often change over time. This may reflect artistic and cultural changes in thinking about aesthetic form in relation to personal and cultural morality, in the arts as well as in everyday reality. However, making an aesthetic judgment about any work of art involves empathetic understanding, and recognizing an authentic attempt at self disclosure, which is embodied in the originality of artistic form itself. I believe that originality, and an artist's authentic attempt at self expression are essential qualities for evaluating an art work because artistic authenticity links the practice of art-making to greater issues of ethics and morality. Authenticity demands originality, as well as imaginative thinking, in order to bring sensible intuition and thought into meaningful artistic form.

Sometimes the art-making process may also require selectively breaking the conventional rules of the medium to fully bring a unique vision into form. But students need to learn the traditional rules and required skills of a particular discipline before they can bend or even break them successfully. The characteristics and materiality of a particular art medium, oil paint for example, have changed little over time, and a lot can be learned from the master painters of the past. There is always a continuum in the making of art works which forms the foundation for the development of contemporary self expression.

Often, a work of art speaks for the individual as well as the community, in a new aesthetic language, which has never been articulated quite this way before; be it in a
painting, a poem or in a novel. The painting in figure 29 entitled *Connected* may explain what I mean by discovering an authentic and new aesthetic language of art.

![Connected](image)

Artistic form in this painting is the result of much experimentation of both the potential possibilities, as well as the limitations of the different paint mediums itself. Building texture and colour from the application of different kinds of paint resulted in a unique textural surface, as enamel and acrylic mixed with different types of pastels. These two figures of a male and a female are intimately connected at the hip, where a
third form appears in the space which both separates and holds them together. This painting is part of an ongoing aesthetic exploration into personal relationships, in order to gain greater personal understanding of the human condition. A unique artistic vision seems to become self evident, as the imagination connects the various cognitive elements, in order to bring forth a new artistic form.

I think that this imaginative connectivity is the source of all authentic artistic self expression. An artist's visual thinking and feeling remain to some extent visible in the finished art work, articulating the complexity of aesthetic meaning in order that it can be communicated to a sympathetic viewer. Many art works embody multiple layers of aesthetic expression, and artistic form often reveals much more than the artist knew, or had consciously intended to express. As Lyas observes, "artists may not have intended and may not even know that this or that quality of their mind is exhibited there" (1997:152).

A work of art will often speak differently to the artist than to viewers, because the subjective imagination has brought to the intellect an awareness of deeply personal thoughts and feelings, as well as long forgotten memories, whose meaning and significance can never be fully articulated. In my experience, the intense sense of recognition, when the imagination discovers significant form in the paint itself will remain with me for all time. Even after many years, I recall this aesthetic pleasure of self discovery, and these precious moments have been forever preserved in the art work itself.

However, other people may have different aesthetic thoughts and feelings when they reflect on the colour and form in the art work. Perhaps they will recognize a part of themselves, which the artist could not have known or consciously intended to display.
For me, the unique materiality of the paint itself often provides many opportunities for creative self expression. For example, artistic form in the painting in figure 30 entitled *Moon Dance* developed from the fluidity of the paint medium itself.

![Moon Dance](image-url)

Although artists may have a special relationship with a work of art, and can often speak with authority about its meaning, they may not always be capable of giving the best interpretation or critique of what is important or significant about it. A painting does not begin with a preconceived form; often aesthetic ideas come to mind once the initial
application of paint has dried. However, sometimes it may take much thought and quiet contemplation, in order to discover and bring forth meaningful artistic form. It may be true that people are often poor critics of their own work, but it seems to me that only an artist truly knows and understands the inherent meaning of what has been represented. In addition, their subjective intention to articulate self consciousness in artistic form is often an important source of valuable information.

The ‘subtler’ language of artistic self expression enriches aesthetic perception and understanding of the complexity of personal and cultural meaning. This ‘subtler’ aesthetic language seems to be grounded in the intuitive sensibility of the artist's personality, which to some extent has been embedded in a work of art. Works of art may also be understood as cognitive maps of individual thoughts and sensible intuition which have been brought into the public domain. Therefore, artistic form can never be entirely separated from human language as such.

Visual thinking – a new aesthetic language

Wollheim claims Leonardo Da Vinci stood for days in front of a wall he was about to paint in thoughtful contemplation, without once lifting his brush. Wollheim presumes this to be self evident of the artist’s thinking process, in order to formulate and articulate his aesthetic vision. As Wollheim argues, “we may suppose that the thoughts that occupied his mind were of painted surface, were perhaps images of ever-developing articulation of what he was to set down” (1978:58). If this is true, it seems that the artwork had been created in the mind of the artist before the actual act of art-making.

It is difficult to believe however, that Leonardo was able to foresee precisely the exact images he was about to create on the wall. In my experience, authentic artistic creation of meaningful form is always an imaginative journey of self discovery that must
acknowledge the significance of the materiality and unpredictability of the art medium. In truth, an artist is not able to fully anticipate the aesthetic form of a picture, because form will realize itself on a canvas or wall. Authentic artistic form develops both out of the problems and opportunities one encounters during the art-making process, as well as from the inherent unpredictability of the medium itself.

Student artists need to learn and understand the historical and philosophical traditions which underpin the making of art works, for a broader perspective of personal and cultural horizons. Knowledge of the art works made across time and place shows artistic form is never created in a vacuum, but is always to some extent culturally determined. In the best of artistic form, personal self expression and cultural meaning are balanced and in harmony, yet there may be a palatable tension between the two. Great works of art often embody this pleasurable tension between self and other. As Taylor observes, “that these demands may be in tension has to be allowed” (1991:66).

The materiality of a particular art medium may present problems that are part of the expressiveness of the art-making process itself, which are often resolved by visually thinking them through. The specific qualities of an art medium often become an intrinsic component of the finished art work, for example, Beuys' used felt for his WWII memorial for a specific reason. Beuys was shot down and wounded during the war, and his badly burnt body was found by Bedouins, who covered his wounds with felt, ultimately saving his life. However, felt also makes reference to the material which has long been used in making military uniforms.

Beuys' use of felt can be read on many different levels of personal and collective meaning, and being aware of the significance of using felt is vital for a finer grasp of his work. Lyas explains that for Beuys, visual thinking involves setting his mind free to play,
The title *Familie* translates from Dutch as the word for family and makes explicit reference to my cultural background. Form in this painting represents a mother and daughter to the left of the canvas and three siblings on the right; two sisters and a boy, who seems to have been unnaturally squeezed in between them. The dark field of withered flowers divides the mother and daughter from the other siblings, suggesting a problematic fracture within the familial relationship.

There is a lot of intense thought and feeling embodied in this little painting, which still has the power to move me. Perhaps because it so aptly describes a suppressed yet disturbing childhood situation, which nevertheless helped shape my perception and understanding of the world. Artistic form in a work of art has a special power to express a personal attitude, and often articulates much more than may have been consciously intended. Frans Hals for example, painted a telling portrait of the Regents and Regentesses of Haarlem, a prosperous merchant city in Holland, which may be interpreted as a telling testimony to his subtle sense of irony.

At the time this work was painted, Hals was an old and destitute painter, who was living off public charity. However he seems to have overcome his subjective feelings of marginalization, in order to see these people who held the purse strings to his existence more or less objectively. It is this "unforgettable contrast", as Berger notes that is "the drama of [this] painting" (1982:15). We don't know much about the men and women Hals portrays, however the detail in this painting is self evident, and speaks eloquently of the possible character of these people, if only one chooses to see.

As Berger observes, "there is the evidence of the painting [the] evidence of a group of men and women as seen by another man, the painter. Study the evidence and judge for yourself" (1982:11). I believe the evidence of the ironic power of the old and
destitute painter is preserved in this painting for all to see. Attention to the details in a painting works a seduction on those who take the time to see its artistic form with a sympathetic eye. Viewers seem to intuitively believe the truth of what an artist has represented in a painting, and this informs their aesthetic judgment. As Berger points out, this painting "work[s] upon us because we accept the way Hals saw his sitters" (1982:14). However, many viewers do not accept the artist's world view innocently, but only in so far as it harmonizes with their own way of seeing the world.

People intuitively grasp the intended meaning behind the gestures and faces of the Regents and Regentesses, perhaps because they represent social institutions which also exist in their own world. Viewers may also compare the character of these people with their own sense of morality and ethical values. Hals was one of the first European painters to express a subjective perspective of an important social change in western culture. His paintings depict the new character of capitalism in the faces and figures of people whose personality viewers may easily recognize, and think about. As Berger states, "it is precisely this which gives the painting [its] psychological and social urgency" (1982:14).

The original purpose of a work of art in the past was to bring a sense of the spiritual and divine into artistic form. Over time, artistic form in European painting increasingly depicts the wealth of the secular and social elite. During the nineteenth century, the invention of the camera forever changed how people perceived the function of art. Painting was particularly affected because a photograph was much cheaper to make, and could more accurately depict the appearance of people and things than a painting. Consequently, nineteenth century photography released painting from the demands of traditional depiction of secular and divine reality. Painters were now free to discover a new visual language of artistic form, in order to depict the visible as well as
the invisible world. In my own work, the intention is to access an invisible world within
the mind which can only be made visible in artistic form. Although form in the painting in
figure 32 entitled *Dark Angels* has been abstracted to almost minimalist proportions, it
still remains inspired by the human figure.

![Fig.32 Dark Angel (1999)](image)

There is a sense of fragmentation in the handling of the background, which
paradoxically also defines its aesthetic form. There seems to be a message this painting
wants to articulate concerning the mystery behind perceived reality, which can only be
hinted at, but can never be fully expressed. It makes me think of an earlier painting,
Fallen Angels, perhaps because of the allegorical myth of the war in heaven; however this dark angel seems free with her arms outstretched and ready to fly.

As with most of the other paintings, artistic form in this work is also somewhat autobiographical because this image was painted during a time when it became increasingly possible to travel more freely. However, the darkness of the figure also foreshadows some major life changes. Seeing and thinking about this painting again, brings back into consciousness specific personal memories, which have been embedded in its form. These ideas can be contemplated and thought about time and again, in order for the mind to discover an ever greater aesthetic understanding of life’s events.

It seems to me that a new way of expressing the complexity of human thinking and perception was initiated by Impressionists painters from Renoir to Cezanne, who explored the transitory effects of light reflecting on the appearances of people and things. As Berger points out, “for the Impressionists the visible no longer presented itself to man in order to be seen, on the contrary, the visible, in continual flux, became fugitive” (1982:18). A few years later, the Expressionist painters increasingly turn their gaze inward in search of authentic self expression, until the Cubist painters no longer saw the visible world from a single perspective.

The relationship between artistic self expression and the quest to find one’s place in the world is extremely intimate. As Taylor argues, “artistic creation becomes the paradigm mode in which people can come to self-definition” (1991:61-62). Western society tends to idealize the artist as a visionary hero, who creates new personal and cultural values. It is believed that artists are able to perceive the essence of the human condition, in their personal struggle to create meaningful artistic form. Perhaps it is true
that the regular practice of making artistic form tends to provide a person with a clearer
definition of the self. If nothing else, bringing thought and sensible intuition into an
artistic form provides a sense of the complexity and unity of the human mind. For
example, the compositional unity of artistic form in the painting in figure 33 entitled
*Inspiration* presents a playful image of a woman celebrating the joy of visual thinking.

![Fig. 33 Inspiration [1999]](image)

This female figure appears to be dancing a jig as she pursues what I would
interpret as the bird of paradise, and may represent the artist's inspirational flight. Even
the background in this painting joins in with the celebratory mood, as the woman dances
her way through spirals and flowerlike forms. I still smile when looking at what this painting expressed to me at the time it was painted. This image seems to indicate a personal transformation in perception and attitude concerning the meaning of living a happy and fulfilled human life.

Artists can't help but articulate subjective attitudes because all their personal experience shapes their work. Everything that happens seems to become part of the subject matter because artistic form reflects human thought as well as emotive feelings. It is a mistake, as Lyas points out, to think that "artists are cut off from comment on serious issues [because it] trivializes art" (1997:197). Goya's work for example, makes a wry comment on the horrors of war, whereas Picasso expressed his revulsion of the bombing of Guernica in a painting by the same name. The personal attitude and understanding of events is there for all to see in the artistic form of the work. I believe that Guernica will always remain an eloquent personal and cultural expression of Picasso's attitude of grief.

Authentic artistic form has the power to speak across time and place concerning the tragedy of war as well as childhood disappointments, which at the same time seem to illuminate the commonality of human nature. Many historic works of art still engage the contemporary imagination, and remain vital expressions of human feeling and thought. It seems that art has the power to clearly articulate meaning in a subtle language most people intuitively response to and understand. As Lyas notes, "the artist is seeking the right word, the right combination of notes or the right compositional line [when] all of a sudden, a light dawns [resolving] her compositional problem" (1997:202). Finding the right aesthetic compositional form in context with the materiality of the medium becomes intertwined with a personal expression of thoughts and feelings about the meaning of experience.
The Western tradition of painting

As noted previously, painting itself has a long history dating back to ancient times; oil painting was first developed in northern Europe during the early Renaissance at the beginning of the fifteenth century. By the sixteenth century, oil painting guilds had established their own unique norms and traditions, which were to form the basis for painting for many centuries to come. Art history books such as Gardner's *Art through the Ages* will confirm that the traditional rules and norms of oil painting were finally challenged during the nineteenth century, first by the French Impressionists and later by the Cubists, and I believe that these challenges coincide with the advent of photography.

The Cubist painters Braque and Picasso however, attempted to depict a true visual image of the complexity of human perception and constantly changing perspective of things. As Berger points out, “for the Cubists the visible was no longer what confronted the single eye, but the totality of possible views taken from points all round the object (or person) being depicted” (1982:18). This fractured image of things becomes increasingly abstract, however the Cubists were adamant that their work remained true to nature and was intended to be a realistic depiction of the way humans see the world.

It may be true that photography is better able to show an appearance of an object or person more accurately, however no one can dispute the aesthetic power of an original oil painting. For example, in confronting Ruben’s depiction of his young wife as she turns towards the spectator just as the fur slips from her shoulder, it seems as if he captured a moment in time, yet this image transcends time. As Berger observes, “in a superficial sense her image is as instantaneous as a photograph but in a more profound sense, the painting contains time and its experience” (1982:60).
Unlike the immediacy of taking a photograph, a painting such as Rubens' *Helene Fourment in a Fur Coat*, takes considerably more time to make, and the image is actually a composite of many separate moments. In this painting the artist has captured consecutive stages in time, and has embedded them in the details of the painted image, which displays the past, present and future all simultaneously. Today, we recognize Rubens as one of the great master painters, who furthered the tradition of European painting in visual images pregnant with meaningful aesthetic form. However, the essence of oil painting may have been somewhat misrepresented by the few great master painters who stood out from the masses.

The history of painting is associated with a few exceptional artists who produced extraordinary works of art that often challenged the traditional norms and values of oil painting. However, as Berger laments, "these artists are acclaimed as the tradition's supreme representatives: a claim which is made easier by the fact that after their death, the tradition closed around their work, incorporating minor technical innovations, and continuing as though nothing of principle had been disturbed" (1982:109). From this misrepresentation of traditional painting, the myth of 'the great artist' emerges as a larger than life hero, who wrestles with angels and demons. In the end, this mythic artist is often consumed by the struggle to live with him or herself, and with others in the world.

Berger compares the idea of the stereotypical artist as "a kind of Jacob wrestling with an Angel" (1982:110). Michelangelo and van Gogh are classic examples of 'tormented' artists who struggled with inner and outer demons, in order to create great works of art. It seems as if the artist struggles not just with life, but also with the very language of the medium of paint. However, for me the painting process is seldom a struggle because, as an expressive painter I do not decide in advance what will go on the canvas, nor the exact colours that will be used. Nor do I consciously will or seek
anything in particular. Rather than a struggle, it seems that allowing the imagination to play freely between sensible intuition and the intellect usually results in finding just the right aesthetic form. For example, the painting in figure 34 entitled Desire illustrates what I mean by allowing the imagination free rein which led to the discovery of these two figures within the colour and paint itself.

Fig. 34 Desire [1999]
This visual image speaks poignantly of two human figures who are reaching out in a gesture of deep yearning for each other. There a pleasant yet urgent tension between the figures and background, as if this precarious balance and harmony might at any moment be shattered. Upon reflection, perhaps the tension between these two figures also implies that to some extent there is a cognitive struggle required to bring these aesthetic ideas to fruition.

It may seem as if some artists struggle not just with life, but also with the very language of the medium of paint. As Berger argues, “each time a painter [is] dissatisfied with the limited role of painting as a celebration of material property and of the status that accompanied it, he inevitably found himself struggling with the very language of his own art as understood by the tradition of his calling” (1982:110). However, it is prudent to remember that the popular conception of the heroic artist is relatively recent, and occurs mainly in Western culture, and there only since the early Renaissance.

As previously noted, European oil painting between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries reflects a cultural shift in Western ideology which coincides with the advent of capitalism during the Renaissance. Oil paintings were increasingly in demand as the visual expression of new cultural attitudes concerning the acquisition of property and the purchasing power of new capital. The aesthetically pleasing materiality of oil paint was uniquely able to express the new wealth of capitalism which, as Berger argues, “could not have found [expression] in any other visual art form” (1982:86-87).

Original oil paintings of this period bear witness to the birth of capitalism in the glorious details of people and objects, painted to depict the owner’s wealth and status like no other art medium had been able to accomplish before. Oil paintings became the favourite way to show the acquisition and abundance of buyable and desirable objects of
a new age. The popularity of oil paintings during the Renaissance, as Berger points out, "did to appearances what capital did to social relations. It reduced everything to the equality of objects. Everything became exchangeable because everything became a commodity" (1982:87).

However, there are always exceptions to the rule and the magnificent paintings of Vermeer, Rembrandt, El Greco and Turner, to mention only a few, contradict the assertion that reality can be measured by its materiality. As Berger observes, "if one studies these works in relation to the tradition as a whole, one discovers that they were exceptions of a very special kind" (1982:87). But it is true that many oil paintings of the period merely reflect the rise of a new capitalist middle class. Many of the bourgeoisie merely desired works of art as expensive acquisitions which confirmed their social status and depictions of their possessions and wealth.

Traditional oil painting has a long history of drawing on publicly shared aesthetic understanding of the divine, and even secular subjects were often perceived as being intensely meaningful in a social context. However, the early Dutch landscapes painted in the seventeenth century by Ruysdael and Hobbema didn't seem to serve a common cultural understanding of divinity, nor did they serve a particular social purpose. These paintings of the Dutch towns and countryside were considered to be an independent activity, with the result that many landscape painters starved, or gave up painting entirely.

Many of these early landscape painters were extraordinary innovators, and their work greatly influenced and modified the tradition of painting. For example, the artistic innovations of the paintings by Ruysdael and Rembrandt are exceptional in terms of redefining artistic vision. In addition, Turner and Constable discovered how to use light
by sketching and painting the subtle and often ineffable nuances in the landscape that point to the later paintings of Monet and the French Impressionists. As Berger notes, "their innovations led progressively away from the substantial and tangible towards the indeterminate and intangible" (1982:105).

*Painting a new way of seeing*

An original oil painting seems to have a special sense of immediacy, making it ever contemporary, because it closes the distance between the act of looking, and the time required to paint the work. As Berger points out, "the immediacy of their testimony [of a] historical moment is literally there before our eyes" (1982:31). In its sense of immediacy, an original painting contains the silent testimony of the painter's perception, thoughts and emotion. Visual thinking and feeling is expressed in the gestures and brush strokes permeating the materiality of the painted surface, something a mere reproduction can never show.

In general however, imaginative form in a painting has a special aesthetic power to fascinate both artist and viewer alike, and the art work seems to have almost a haunting quality to it. The painting in figure 35 entitled *Endings* shows what I mean by a haunting quality lingering in a painting, because its artistic form clearly illustrates an intense emotional event. This particular title supports the meaning of what the form in this painting shows; that a close personal relationship has ended.

I think that authentic self expression in a painting clearly demonstrates that artistic form cannot be separated from the painted surface, because they are intimately interconnected. It seems as if personal and cultural meaning hides in the chaos of paint, as the figures patiently wait for the artist to bring them into form. The simplicity of these forms expresses a universal human truth concerning the pain and bewilderment, when
human relationships irretrievably break down. For me, this painting shouts out a sense of alienation as the female figure quietly gazes out at the viewer, while the masculine form turns away in hopeless despair.

Fig. 35 Endings [2000]

It is a visual image which tells a story most people can readily comprehend, and perhaps even relate to. The meaning of this image needs no words or text, not even a title to explain the inherent meaning behind its artistic form. Imaginative fusion between form and context reveals that they are entwined and interdependent, and both are
equally necessary for aesthetic understanding of the art work's essential meaning. The painter's imagination has found significant form in the plasticity of the materiality of paint to express the intensity of feeling about an aesthetic idea, but the painting is never a mere illustration of it. As Read points out, "the idea is not illustrated, the illustration is the idea" (1960:183). If the prompting of the imagination has been followed rather than the fads and fashions of the day, a painting reveals an individual insight into a generally understood human concept.

During the nineteenth century, the Symbolist painters explored the idea that a landscape painting could articulate much more than an artist's subjective response to seeing artistic form in nature. The painter Caspar David Friedrich for example, paints the landscape in order to express a personal vision which goes beyond mere perception of the objects seen in nature. His paintings speak of the ineffable and spiritual in nature, and artistic form is not based on any accepted conventions of traditional oil painting. The Symbolist painters, as Taylor observes, "aim to let the forms of nature speak directly, their power released by their ordering within the work of art" (1991:85-86).

The painters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were masters at depicting the glorious details of the materiality of the landscape as well as in portraiture. Oil paintings in particular retain the personal imprint of the artist's imaginative journey during the art-making process, left in the marks and gestures of the paint medium itself. The unique style of these artists, and the unity and wholeness of the composition of their paintings still provide contemporary viewers with timeless perceptual and intellectual pleasure.

After WWII, a group of New York artists known collectively as the Abstract Expressionists continued the European enquiry into the nature of artistic form as
authentic self expression that would ultimately lead to the nihilism of Minimalism. The Minimalist painters denied that artistic form should be linked to nature and in addition, they renounce the need for artistic self expression in art-making all together. For Minimalists, the two dimensional structure of a painting’s flat surface was believed to be incompatible with depicting the illusion of three dimensional space.

Be that as it may, it seems most painters have used the expressive nature and sensuous quality of the materiality of paint as a means to understand and master the medium’s laws and limitations. A painter often exploits the physical characteristics of the medium and marks left on the canvas, in order to suggest drama in a three dimensional space. Many paintings have an undeniable theatrical sense of movement and rhythm, suggesting that the painter may have visualized artistic form in musical terms. Many viewers find these paintings interesting, and value the aesthetic pleasure of artistic form in things they may never have noticed or thought about before.

For me, visual images that appear in a painting seem to originate in a collective mythological consciousness, yet these forms resonate with intense personal meaning. The painting in figure 36 entitled The Three Graces illustrates how form seems to articulate a mythological idea which originates in a collective cultural consciousness. As the title suggests, these three figures refer to an ancient Greek myth of three sisters, collectively called the Three Graces. These three goddesses personify joy, charm and beauty, and this mythological concept is a recurring idea in Western art history.

These three sisters were the daughters of Zeus and Eurynome; the figure on the left is Aglaia, who represents splendour, Euphrosyne in the middle, mirth and Thalia on the right, good cheer. Collectively these three sisters brought goodwill and joy to Greek society and the gods and goddesses on Olympus alike. They presided over such
pleasurable social events as banquets and communal dances, and they attended Eros and Aphrodite, the god and goddess of love respectively.

Fig. 36 The Three Graces [2000]

Along with the Muses, the Three Graces also inspired artists and poets to create beautiful works of art. This painting articulates an old mythology, and this aesthetic idea returns in later paintings. The involuntary nature of the act of painting requires letting go of ego control, not consciously seeking to express something in particular but allowing form to freely and authentically reveal itself in the art medium. For me, authentic artistic creativity reveals that the active imagination has the power to bridge the abyss between personal and collective issues. This aesthetic unification of subject and object also reveals a greater human rationality and consciousness of self and others.
Most people appear to be fascinated by a painting's depiction of mythological allegory, and they intuitively respond to its inherent message that speaks of the commonality of the human condition. Kandinsky describes this intuitive aesthetic response and consequent comprehension as, "a corresponding vibration in the human soul" (1977:34). This human need for expressing personal and cultural mythological ideas will remain forever embedded in the art work itself, and will be intuitively understood by generations of art lovers to come. However, as Read points out, "apart from any aesthetic considerations, the value of such art will depend on the significance of the imagery [brought] to the surface and transferred directly to [the] canvas" (1960:176).

In any event, the painting process is a creative act, which brings an expressive idea forth into form which is able to articulate a greater self consciousness. When a painting is finished and the goal has been reached, the intensity of thought and feeling, and sense of self-confidence quickly dissipates, and the imagination must search for new ways to be productive. But in the end, only time will tell if a work of art has enough personal style and artistic form to be able to speak clearly across the ages to others about fundamental human truth. However, the aesthetic ideas expressed in great works of art seem to have 'staying power' which enables many people to appreciate and understand its meaning today, and likely in times to come.

Many expressive painters know every feeling and thought, conscious and unconscious, becomes raw material for the making of art. In addition, I believe that contemplation and aesthetic appreciation of artistic form may also provide a valuable opportunity to transform human consciousness. As Kuspit notes, "art has not only the power of transforming materials by relocating them in an aesthetic order of perception and understanding but also of transforming the perception and understanding of different
kinds of being by making explicit their hidden connection [to] evoke a sense of unity” (1986: 315).

However this unity of aesthetic understanding has been challenged by the advent of postmodernism. Philosophers such as Derrida and Lyotard rejected the notion of a grand narrative and deconstructed language as well as artistic form. Postmodernity embraced the social concept of many voices who all clamour to be heard, however too few people are listening. The deconstruction of language and artistic form led to a general sense of malaise in contemporary society, which certain contemporary artists attempt to address.

Postmodern artists such as Kiefer, Chicago and Emin use artistic form as a pedagogical image, in order to go beyond the modernist search for self consciousness, in order to articulate broader social issues. The following chapter will explore the consequences of postmodern deconstruction on words and text of a language and artistic form in contemporary art more fully.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE DECONSTRUCTION OF LANGUAGE AND ART

After the Second World War, another cultural shift in thinking occurs in the West, as the optimism of modernism is replaced by a postmodern sense of general malaise. Many people no longer believed in a God, or a unifying grand narrative that had anchored previous generations. Consumerism, in an increasingly globalized society led to a gradual slide towards selfish individualism and alienation. It seems as if nothing is sacred, as philosophers such as Derrida and Lyotard deconstruct the very meaning of language and art. For postmodernists, the artist as speaker is considered to be irrelevant in the viewer's interpretation of artistic form. In response, many contemporary artists make art works which are difficult, if not impossible to understand.

On the positive side, postmodernism acknowledged the relevance of many different voices, giving minorities a chance to articulate their unique perspective of the world. Many contemporary artists, Kiefer, Chicago and Emin for example, use artistic form to express their concerns about many social issues left unspoken by Western society. Some of these artists intend their works of art to function as pedagogical tools for teaching a new aesthetic language that critiques the traditional view of Western culture's history, art and philosophy.

The malaise of postmodernity

There has been a tendency in twentieth century Western thought to reject the traditional grand narratives of the past as well as authority figures, including God. This negation has shaken the very foundations of human thought, affecting not only religion but also science and morality. Losing faith in the underlying unity of human experience resulted in a general feeling of malaise in contemporary culture, and this posthuman view threatens to destroy people's very physical and spiritual existence. But perhaps
losing a common moral and spiritual foundation has been the price Western culture had
to pay for the humanist search for individual freedom and a broader sense of self
consciousness. It may have been a necessary step to negate the authority of God and a
unifying grand narrative in order to advance the idea of, what Lyas calls, “human liberty

This cultural transformation has its roots in ancient Greece and Plato’s allegory of
the cave, if this story is interpreted as a metaphor for humanity’s quest for individual
consciousness. The ancient Grecian search for individual self consciousness reappears
during the Renaissance, finding full expression in Kant’s eighteenth century aesthetic
philosophy. Kant revolutionized Western philosophy by stating that all human cognition
originates in the mind, and not from outside the body. Kant’s philosophy fit perfectly with
the new modernist view of individualism, where man is considered to be the centre of the
universe, and the divine was to be found in the mind alone. Kant restructures Plato’s
allegory of the cave for a new age because once having seen the sun, one was now free
to live in the light of reason, rather than watch the shadows on the cave wall.

Losing the foundation of a grand cultural and spiritual narrative may have
become problematic for postmodern society because it encourages self absorption, and
the alienation of posthumanism, with all that this name implies. The individual’s quest
for self consciousness has resulted in selfish isolationism, and the loss of general
communal guidance and rules has eroded respect for law and order. It appears many
people in contemporary society have lost sight of their social obligations, as well as the
rights of others in the community. In addition, contemporary life is often transitory
because an economically globalized culture has to be extremely mobile. Therefore
people often move from place to place, away from the protective social fabric and
cohesion of family and friends.
Greater mobility and personal freedom in postmodern society also brought new knowledge about different ways of living from a variety of cultures around the world. Because postmodernity encouraged the expression of many voices, a great variety of literature and film became available to the general public. For example, some traditional cultures are more feminine centred, engaging in ritualistic music and dance as part of their seasonal celebrations. Artistic form in the painting in figure 37 entitled *Dancing to a Different Drum* was inspired by the ancient power of communal drumming and dancing.

The figures in this painting depict three women, as they dance and drum in the ancient way. Artistic form gives a sense that the three female figures are dancing and drumming in unison, as a masked figure looks out at the viewer. I recall how these
figures grew out of the seemingly arbitrary marks of paint on the canvas to form a totally unified composition that only required to be brought out from the medium itself. As intuitive feeling and intellectual understanding worked together to pull out the forms, a previously unknown idea that the imagination had discovered in the mind was visually expressed. Of course, this image was also inspired by literature and films of the day, but the figures themselves came directly from interacting with the colour and paint itself.

I think it is important to stress that there was no preconceived idea of what this painting would articulate prior to its conception. For me, artistic form in this painting expresses a personal and collective need for a new world mythology to replace the loss of a grand narrative, which can explain the mystery of human existence in a new aesthetic language. Perhaps the contemporary alienation from loved ones in Western culture can be overcome if people remember that all human perception, feelings and understanding, including the conception of divinity, resides in the mind.

Prior to modernity, people were born, lived and died in the same place, and their entire life was spent among an unchanging group of people, and most did what was expected of them. There were clear rules in place regarding what was considered right and wrong, which everyone understood. Cultural values, as well as social norms and rules, were traditionally passed on to the next generation by teachers and elders in the community. In today's global culture however, people seldom stay in one place long enough to feel connected to others. Often, children or parents may move far away from home in order to find work, leaving the security of family and friends behind.

It seems as if in this contemporary global society, consumerism and greed have all but replaced a unifying grand narrative and the religious traditions that have sustained humanity for millennia. It has become abundantly clear that the Almighty Dollar has
taken the place of an Almighty God in Western consumer culture, as the needs of humanity have become a matter to be bought and sold. It seems, at least in the West that money can buy almost everything; and it is money most people worship, on their knees, if necessary.

Although there is a terrible price to pay for this compulsive search for self gratification, I agree with Taylor who still believes the modernist notion of individuation is the crowning glory of Western art and philosophical thought. I also believe that the search for greater individual self consciousness has been a necessary and valuable human development. However it is lamentable that the horrendous power of today's greed and consumerism has invaded the cultural ideology of almost everyone on the entire planet.

The down side of this compulsive search for self consciousness has been out of control consumerism. The result of selfish greed and personal detachment from others is a posthuman culture of isolated people, who live in a world of pain no drug can cure. As Berger points out, "today the fundamental decisions which effect the unnecessary pain increasingly suffered across the planet, have been and are made unilaterally without any open consultation or participation" (2003:xi). However, even if given the democratic chance to participate and vote, most people would rather abstain.

There seems to be a general complacency and erosion of democratic principles today, perhaps because most people keep to themselves and don't bother to get involved in the community. This extreme autonomy of the individual has left many people desensitized to the misery of others in the world, whether they are the next door neighbours or starving millions in Africa or Afghanistan. It seems a shame that most people in the West don't exercise their right to vote at election time. Nor do they care
about the personal and cultural values of the politicians who represent them, and make
decisions on their behalf. The majority of people just want to be left alone, so they can
play the latest computer games after a long day at the office.

Taylor calls the erosion of individual responsibility in the community and world
affairs soft despotism in order to describe a culture where most people have given up an
active role in how contemporary society is to be administered. The Western world has
become a culture of narcissism, and paradoxically this has led to a loss of individual
freedom. The majority of people fail to exercise hard won democratic rights during
elections; consequently they have given away their individual power. In addition, a
labyrinth of government bureaucracy has usurped many gains in personal civil liberties,
while the system actively discourages individual participation.

Lacking the will for change, people continue their treks to the mall in gas guzzling
SUV's, as they continue to live in a violent and often ruthless world. Everyone looks out
only for themselves, while the social safety nets for the less fortunate are rapidly
disappearing. With the natural abundance in the province of British Columbia, for
example, it is unconscionable that the mentally ill are abandoned to live on the streets
and in the gutters of the less affluent areas of Vancouver. However, as Berger explains,
“this is the logical basis for ideology's pitilessness” (2003: vii-viii).

As if to counter this moral nihilism, the painting in figure 39 entitled Holding up
the World depicts a feminine figure, her arms raised as if supporting an unseen world.
Her face is averted from the viewer, as she concentrates on the difficult task at hand.
This painting reminds me of the labours of Psyche, perhaps articulating the difficult task
of personal individuation and gaining a broader perspective and better understanding of
human experience. A crescent moon looms in the background, making reference to the
feminine principle of relatedness, as it is often the women who hold a family and a culture together.

In addition, the title of this painting also makes a subtle reference to the ancient Greek myth of Atlas holding up the world. However in this contemporary painted metaphor of an ancient story, it is definitely a woman who has the strength and fortitude to accomplish this great deed.
Taylor enquires into the ideals of authenticity in today's transnational world where people are detached from the local community because the globalization of consumer products has been widely internationalized. Although the quest for individual autonomy and greater self consciousness has led to the malaise of postmodern consumerism and soft despotism, Taylor still argues for the moral ideal behind the concept of individualism. He believes the drive for individuation reflects the human need for self fulfillment, and being true to one self by living an authentic life. But there is a darker side to this limited focus on the self and the egotistical drive for individualism, because it narrows and flattens the context which gives human life meaning and significance.

This loss of contextual meaning in contemporary life has led to many apathetic people who lack passion and the ability to perceive the beauty that surrounds them, preferring to live empty lives in a seemingly barren and disenchanted world. Living without the secure foundation of a grand narrative or a sense of the divine has left a personal and cultural void begging to be filled. "It is easy enough to conclude that the decline of the classical order leaves only the self and its powers to celebrate", as Taylor wryly observes but he cautions, "the slide to subjectivism, and its blend of authenticity with self-determining freedom, is all too readily open" (1991:89).

Poverty, disease, famine and war are still problems which remain today, just as always but along with them, environmental pollution and natural and manmade disasters have contributed to the displacement of millions of people. As Eagleton argues, in "the new millennium astonishingly, humankind faces pretty much the kinds of material problems it always has, with a few novel ones like debt, drugs, and nuclear armaments thrown in for good measure" (2000:130-131).
This extreme focus on self gratification, consumerism and greed has created, what Kuspit describes as the "harsh tyranny of the materialistic philosophy of society" (1986: 314). As Lyas points out, "humanism that is so proudly thought to underlie European civilization turns out to be compatible with a penchant for committing obscene atrocities" (1997:183). Perhaps these current events are possible because Western culture exemplifies the virtues of a form of humanism that believes instrumental reason is superior to intuitive sensibility. I believe that it is this unnatural imbalance between thinking and feeling that may be the reason for this general sense of malaise and disenchantment in today's world. Furthermore, I think that the making and appreciation of art can bridge this sense of disparity.

Contemporary biological and nuclear warfare aside, it seems most people lack a sense of fairness and respect for others, and justice and equality for everyone is rapidly eroding. As different cultures clash over ideological differences, the chasm between East and West becomes ever greater, as each side demonizes the other. Demonizing others makes them appear less than human, but also precludes any possibility of mutual respect. Overcoming this chasm between different people requires that they engage in a reciprocal dialogue, in order to discover the fundamental similarities of human nature. As Fish suggests, "we can argue about it but we don't kill each other over differences. Let's live and let live. Let's obey the civil, nonsectarian laws and leave the sorting out of big theological questions to God and eternity" (2002:36). Humanity should have learned by now that violence begets more violence, and conflict and war have never resolved the underlying issues of equitable sharing of limited resources.

The painting in figure 39 entitled Quantum Leap articulates a more hopeful outlook for humanity's ability to bridge personal and cultural differences. In addition, the title of this painting also makes reference to science, and the new physics of quantum
mechanics. The figure appears to be a female athlete who is leaping over an unseen hurdle, and by doing so, she has been liberated.

![Quantum Leap](image)

**Fig. 39 Quantum Leap [2001]**

Similar to Copernicus and Newton's physics and Kant's philosophical response, the new physics of quantum mechanics has turned the contemporary world of science upside down. The lyrical quality of the painted background speaks to the unpredictability factor of quantum theory, which explains the world as consisting of ever smaller particles which are all interacting with each other. As in Kant's time, today's new science also has the power to change how people perceive and understand their world.
I believe that this change in contemporary thinking, in terms of quantum physics, will extend across all academic disciplines. There is a profound need in today's globalized world for a new 'interdisciplinary vision' capable of perceiving what is actually happening in the world. This new global vision requires dialogue between all the disciplines and fields of knowledge that the academic and political institutions have traditionally kept separate. Berger points out that the starting point of this new interdisciplinary vision is “the precondition of thinking politically on a global scale to see the unity of the unnecessary suffering taking place” (2003: x).

Although cultural tensions, the politics of self-interest, consumerism and the clash between different cultural ideologies have created constant conflict and stress, people have much in common if they are given the freedom of choice. There are universal and shared principles of human existence that can provide the necessary ground for initiating a respectful and reciprocal dialogue. An open dialogue about personal and cultural differences may facilitate a meeting of minds, because most people share a common aesthetic language. Many cultures across time and place have made and appreciated works of art and enjoyed sharing aesthetic experience and understanding.

The contemporary deconstruction of language

For Derrida and the poststructuralists, the meaning of words and text in a human language may be independent of the author's intentions. Therefore it is important that people choose their words very carefully, making sure to articulate the intended meaning clearly. As Lyas points out, "it is a condition of having an intention that one be able to represent one's intended meaning to oneself. This presumably means bringing before one's mind a form of words that does have the [determinate] meaning one wishes to
express" (1997:162-163). For poststructuralists, deconstructing the meaning of language can only be determined if the words and text which have been used, are an accurate representation and record of the author’s understanding of experience.

Derrida believes that once an utterance has been made, the meaning of words takes on a life of their own and the intentions of the person making the utterance becomes irrelevant in determining its meaning. Language, as Lyas argues, “requires only truly to record what is in those texts and names of authors and doctrines have no substantial value” (1997: 178). It may be true that words and language take on a meaning of their own, but I would suggest that the speaker’s intentions should also be taken into consideration, for a complete grasp of the meaning of what has been communicated. But in the end, an utterance must be able to stand on its own and an expressive work of art is no exception.

The painting in figure 40 entitled The Circle illustrates the point that a work of art must be able to speak for itself because expressive form takes on a meaning of its own. I agree that aesthetic understanding should not necessitate further articulation because the intended meaning has to some extent, been embedded in the painted image itself. I recall as form in this painting grew from the fluidity of the medium, significant meaning became increasingly clear in my mind. Although the title clarifies this painting’s intended meaning, it is form itself that determines how viewers interpret what they see.

The human figures in this painting depict a circle of women sitting together; the two central feminine forms have their backs to the viewer. This image feels as if viewers have accidentally walked into a private celebration or perhaps even a tribunal. This painting may be interpreted as a public gathering where the fate of these two women is to be determined by the group. The full moon in the background adds to the solemnity
of the occasion, and is intended to refer to the ultimate power of the age-old council of women who decided important communal decisions.

Fig. 40 The Circle [2001]

Archaeological studies confirm that in many ancient cultures it was a council of elders, often of only women who determined what had to be done and made important
decisions that would affect the entire social group. The decision to go to war, for instance, or determining an appropriate punishment for crimes committed was made by a council of elders who had the ultimate say in deciding these matters.

On another level, this painting may also be understood as a tribute to the First Nations people of Canada, because sitting in circle remains an important part of their personal and cultural healing ceremonies. However, the complexity of meaning behind form in this visual image goes beyond mere words and text, and ultimately it will be the viewer who is required to use their imagination to comprehend the depth of what an artist has tried to express. But for the poststructuralists, as soon as words are spoken or artistic form has been expressed, they no longer belong to the speaker. Once an idea has been articulated, the utterance becomes part of the public domain of language, and now belongs to everyone.

For Derrida, words are used in a 'system of difference' which determines meaning, and he rejects the structuralist view of closure to the meaning of a text. For deconstruction, everyone is free to express their individuality in the words and text of a common language, in order to articulate who they are and what they think. This requires carefully choosing words and images for effective communication, in order to make private thoughts and feelings public and understood.

However, there is a problematic single mindedness to the deconstructionist idea of the indeterminate nature of human language, because this view negates the dialogical aspect of language. Deconstructionists also forget the personal and cultural limitations that may restrict a speaker's ability to effectively articulate determinate meaning so others can understand. The deconstructionist view also negates people's sense of autonomy and their personal power to learn a new language, which may not necessarily
require words or text. For example, the 'subtler' language of art may speak more effectively in communicating the complex meaning of personal thoughts and feelings.

**Deconstruction and contemporary art**

If the intention of an author is of little consequence once an utterance has been articulated and made public, it follows that once an art work is finished, the artist's intentions are also irrelevant. For example, once a painting is finished, it must be able to speak for itself in a 'subtler' language that may only partially communicate its intended meaning. Often mere words in a language may not be enough for meaningful self expression because, as Eisner argues, "not everything knowable can be articulated in propositional form [as] the limits of our cognition are not defined by the limits of our language" (2004:7).

Sometimes, an utterance cannot be found by using pre-existing and outdated models, but may require inventing a new language, of artistic form perhaps that may be able to articulate a personal aesthetic vision. Some people may search for greater personal awareness by envisioning an authentic self image, and express it in artistic form to the best of their ability. An authentic artistic articulation of human thought and feelings usually results in a fresh and original personal expression, while also articulating important social values. However, far from being irrelevant to the meaning of artistic form, the artist intentions, as Lyas points out, are "manifested in the work [and] are inscribed in the language" (1997:183).

I agree with the deconstructionists' view that the final authority lies with the art work itself, and an artist is never the absolute authority of its determinate meaning. However, artists may have additional knowledge of a uniquely personal nature that concerns the interpretation of meaning. For example, although the painting in figure 42
entitled *Requiem* clearly expresses great sorrow, knowing more about what was in the artist's mind may provide a richer aesthetic understanding.

![Requiem Painting](image)

As the title implies, this painting is a personal expression of intense despair concerning the fragmentation of today's society, where family and friends often live far apart. Artistic form brings to mind a sense of loss at the separation and loss of loved ones, which still has the power to affect me. Although this painting is quite abstracted, for me it clearly shows a woman on her knees, clutching her face as if in deep distress. She is bent over and seems to be crying, and this idea is reinforced by the puddle of paint emulating from her face. The shapes above her body are meant to represent various thought forms, which suggest different aspects of the fragmentation of family and friends in contemporary life.
Since the eighteenth century, artists have no longer been defined by their skill to imitate objects in nature, and a painting has increasingly become equated with creating original and authentic self expression. Derrida and the philosophy of deconstruction takes aim at this Renaissance notion of a hero artist who is a visionary creator of new and innovative cultural values. The crucial cornerstone for deconstructionist thought is the combination of the modernist principle of artistic originality, with the contemporary notion of 'many voices' who all want to be heard. Today each person is called to live life authentically, and not in imitation of anyone else. Being true to one self has become a new and important idea that stresses a person must not miss one moment of life, but should live fully and honestly as whom they really are. The idea of self determination and being true to personal potentiality and originality underpins the core issue of the ideal of authenticity, but it is often an intense struggle.

The challenge of deconstruction reflects the malaise of postmodernism during a time when long held cultural values were rapidly eroding, and the connection to people as well as nature was all but broken. Most people have lost contact with the natural rhythms of the earth and the traditions of the ancestors, leading to a general malaise of the soul and disenchantment of the world. This polarization of today's malaise is triple-fold; people are divided within themselves, they are divided between themselves, and they are divided from nature and the earth. Although today every person may express their original and complex vision of reality in a common language, all too often there are too many voices and not enough listeners.

*Communicating in a reciprocal dialogue*

The need to be heard and be recognized by others often requires an honest disclosure of personal identity through open dialogue, while respecting the need for
recognition of others. Recognizing the uniqueness of each individual demands a mutual and reciprocal relationship of trust, and the ability to share common points of reference in a mutually understood language. When people communicate effectively with others, they realize each person is an integral part of a cultural whole. By extending this attitude to others, people learn to articulate their experience and share their unique insights in a dignified and respectful dialogue, where everyone has a voice that will be heard.

Meaningful communication starts with a discussion between two reasonable people with different horizons of significance, who attempt to find the commonality of human thought and feelings. Everyone has the right to freely exchange ideas with others who matter, in a common language which has self determining freedom interwoven with authentic self disclosure. In a larger context, this is also true of the language of art, because personal identity can be discovered in the authentic self expression of form in a work of art.

The painting in figure 42 entitled Annunciation is a particular favorite of mine because the message this image contains is one of gentle optimism and hope for the future. Artistic form, reinforced by the title, illustrates a well known biblical story about the visitation of the archangel Gabriel, who appeared to Mary to bring her ‘tidings of great joy’. However, in this painting, the angel comes in female form, and she appears to be waving a magic wand, much as the fairy godmother who transforms Cinderella in a Grimm’s fairytale.

The figure on the right represents Mary who casts her eyes down modestly, as the angel swings her magic wand while she articulates her message. A star-like form hovers above Mary’s head, reminding me of the divine flame of the Holy Spirit that appeared over the heads of the apostles at Pentecost. There is also a suggestion of a
halo to indicate not only this woman's holiness, but also the tremendous significance of the occasion.

Fig. 42 Annunciation [2002]

In the foreground, flower-like forms float sporadically within an ethereal bluish-green, giving a surreal feeling to the two figures in this painting. The rose forms also make reference to Marian iconography because in medieval times, roses were commonly understood to be associated with her image.

I believe titles are important because words in a language make shared assumptions publicly available as a common reference point for all members of a linguistic group. Everyone can draw upon these commonly understood ideas and images for personal expression as well as greater aesthetic understanding. For many
centuries, artists shared certain basic assumptions about the ability of the language of art to express divine as well as secular meaning, and preserve it within artistic form. However, many artists today no longer have a common language of form to drawn on for inspiration. It seems as if each artist is required to articulate anew the nature of the world for which there are no adequate representational images. Consequently, people today must choose artistic form from a ‘forest of symbols’.

The contemporary aesthetic language of Kiefer, Chicago and Emin

For some contemporary artists, the search for self consciousness is not their main concern; instead they try to explore a greater order of something beyond the self. These artists make works of art which speak of the essential nature of the human predicament. For them artistic creativity, as Taylor argues, is “about the relation of the living to the dead, about human frailty, and the power of transfiguration present in language” (1991: 89). These contemporary artists search for an authentic aesthetic language that can express a personal response to socially relevant issues of their time. They may be concerned with human relationships, and people’s place in the world in context with the natural order of things. Their art work expresses a deep need to belong to society and honour their obligations to a larger order, rather than to a subjective self.

For example, the German painter Anselm Kiefer creates works of art that speak to the European malaise of a post-war generation forced to face the breakdown of universal values, after the tragedies of the twentieth century. Kiefer studied informally with Joseph Beuys at a time when he was synthesizing complex aesthetic ideas into conceptual and performance art, under the influence of Arte Povera and primitivism. Beuys is described by Rosenthal as “a unique voice [in] the dialogue between art and life” (1987:12). For Beuys, artistic form contains all the elements that matter to
humanity, be they psychological, spiritual, historical or scientific. In his art-making, Beuys freely makes use of a variety of metaphors and mythologies from multiple cultures in order to create intensely personal artistic expressions about his war experience. It is from Beuys that Kiefer learns about artistic integrity in the shaping of authentic artistic form, in a quest for greater understanding of human events in context of making a work of art.

The despair depicted in Kiefer's paintings expresses the fears and insecurities of a post-war generation that is concerned with the legacy of Germany's past, and feels threatened by a future devoid of cultural ideals and tradition. As Gilmour explains, "one result is loss of confidence in the ideals and way of life inherited from the Enlightenment [and] Kiefer is no exception to this response" (1990: xii). Kiefer's imagination draws freely from Western philosophy and history of art, and unites them in art work that expresses historical ideas in contemporary terms.

The nature of Kiefer's paintings is 'intertextual' in the sense that he freely mixes complex ideas and different materials in huge paintings and sculpture that contain many conflicting cognitive and affective associations. Kiefer, as Gilmour points out, "draws freely from such diverse sources as the Exodus from Egypt, ideas about the celestial hierarchy in Dionysius the Areopagite, Nordic myths, German military and cultural history, and shamanistic religion" (1980:4). Art-making for Kiefer amalgamates a variety of cultural narratives, and reworks them into an innovative aesthetic understanding of world events.

The painting in figure 43 entitled Eureka illustrates what I mean by reworking multiple cultural narratives in the shaping of contemporary artistic form. The word eureka originates in ancient Greece, and translates as the celebratory exclamation
"I have found it!" The word *eureka* itself is attributed to Archimedes who exclaimed it when he discovered the answer to a scientific problem he had been thinking about.

Fig. 43 Eureka I [2002]

However, form in this painting also celebrates a discovery of a more personal nature, as a man and woman rejoice together in sheer ecstasy. The unity of design and composition expresses a harmonious balance between masculine and feminine energy, yet these dancing figures appear as if ready to jump off the canvas, shattering this fragile equilibrium. Even the spiral between these two figures seems to echo joy, as these figures dance together in wild abandon. A closer look at the background affirms this happy mood, reinforced in the heart shapes scratched into the wet paint.
This painting demonstrates that in the act of painting, it is possible to reach beyond the merely narrative and historical to express a very contemporary perception and understanding of human relationships in terms of ancient and enduring aesthetic ideas. In this painting, the mind reached beyond cultural narratives and historical mythology, in order to express the joy of personal relationships. As Gilmour points out, "by synthesizing the traditional and the modern, the mythological and the rational, the simulated and the real [an artist] achieves a puzzling and provocative mixture of elements that inspire us to reconsider our assumptions and formulate our visions anew" (1990:5).

The complex personal and cultural reference points inherent in the artistic form of contemporary paintings may stimulate much reflective thinking. Therefore a philosophical painter creates form that will provoke further questions concerning people's most basic assumptions. Although contemporary painting is referentially grounded in modernism, artists often mix abstract and representational elements that have been detached from the object, making the intended meaning sometimes difficult to fully grasp. Artistic creativity today is often an extremely complex process, as a painter alternates different types of paint on the canvas, while the mind explores aesthetic ideas concerning Western culture's artistic and historical heritage. Many artists today rework modernist assumptions in order to raise important questions concerning the nature of representation and painting that push the limits of aesthetic perception and rational understanding.

Some contemporary artists express their curiosity, posing questions about what is real and what is simulated as a metaphor for the chaos of the times. These artists creatively employ mythical, historical and cosmological grand narratives, in order to shift our understanding of the past and reveal that these narratives still exert power over
people's thinking today. Kiefer's tragic outlook and cosmological themes for example, raise important questions about technology and modernity, as he expresses his personal understanding of the 'postmodern moment'. As Gilmour notes, "Kiefer's postmodern art clarifies issues left unresolved within modernism and sheds light on leading conceptual questions that relate to the postmodern world" (1990:15).

The complexity of possible aesthetic interpretation and understanding of the meaning of artistic form may inspire many questions concerning its mysterious source, in context with collective memories of mythological and historical events. It is not uncommon for contemporary artists to appropriate artistic form from a wide variety of sources, including the history of Western art and philosophy. Some artists also explore ancient and modern cosmologies, mythologies and icons of the grand narratives of the past in order to challenge the complacency limiting people's view of humanity and the world.

Some of today's artists explicitly use form in their work that make reference to the grand narratives of the past in order to make a point about how they see and understand their personal and cultural history. For example, the image in the painting in figure 44 entitled River of Life makes personal thoughts and feelings visible and understandable in context with the collective past. But at the same time, the figures in this painting also map out a possible future with a more optimistic outlook.

These two figures, although highly abstracted, suggest a man and a woman who have taken the plunge so to speak, into the river of life. The stream runs rapidly along, dispersing among many threatening boulders, but the figures seem unafraid, even ecstatic as their hands embrace the running water. Although artistic form is always discovered in colour and the paint itself, this image clearly articulates metaphorically
both the place where I live, as well as the beginning of a new personal relationship. The imagination had found exactly the right form to give expression of a personal truth whose meaning is intuitively recognized and understood. For me, form in this painting speaks of a personal truth which may at the same time reflect the common needs of others in Western culture.

![River of Life (2002)](image)

It seems that contemporary works of art often reflect a complex and more developed perspective of artistic creativity and thoughtful aesthetic understanding. Essential to this expanded view is the idea that tragic action exposes many different levels of reality that interconnect, but do not coincide. Many contemporary paintings reflect this multi-layered perspective because artists intentionally play with the tension
that exists between these different planes of aesthetic understanding. Take Kiefer’s massive landscape painting called *Midgard* for example. This painting simultaneously refers to mythological and historical events as well as to the German land itself, as perceived from multiple perspectives. On the one hand, this painting’s perspective appears to be close to the earth, yet at the same time a viewer seems to hover above it.

I would propose that the tragedy and malaise of contemporary society is intimately connected to this collective sense of loss of faith in a unifying mythology that can explain in metaphorical terms, the meaning of human existence. A few contemporary artists express this need for a new global mythology, whose concepts and narratives most people can understand and believe in. Many contemporary works of art, as Gilmour observes, “provoke questions about the role we assign to narrative and the tendency we have to regard science as the only legitimate form of knowledge and the most reliable basis for action” (1990:99).

Painters often use the canvas as an arena to play out their post-modernist vision. Multiple levels of intense meaning may generate much reflective contemplation as well as curiosity about a viewer’s own thoughts and feelings concerning certain human events. For example, the painting in figure 45 entitled *Survivors* expresses personal thoughts and feelings concerning current cultural and historical events that have happened across the globe. The title of this painting was inspired by the daily news of the millions of displaced refugees in the world who have been left homeless because of famine or war.

These pathetic figures are the lucky ones, they are the survivors, but a sense of disillusionment hangs heavy among the figures of women and children. Reminiscent of Kiefer’s work, this painting also articulates a sense of losing faith in a unifying grand
narrative, and asks a fundamental question concerning the nature of human existence on earth, and in the cosmos.

By making explicit reference to the cultural value of the grand narratives of the past, many contemporary artists have challenged the nihilism of outdated modernist thought. Their art works raise intelligent questions concerning the nature and mystery of the world, the cosmos and humanity’s place in it. I would argue that many ancient ideas and mythological stories still have instrumental value for contemporary art-making and meaningful understanding of form in the art work of others. In this sense, some contemporary artists ask reflective viewers to grasp the value of connecting old as well as new cognitive maps in a contemporary context that seeks to advance the pedagogical function of art. I mean pedagogical in the sense of passing on the wisdom of the ages to the next generation in an aesthetically pleasing work of art.
Artistic form has the power to provide a fresh new aesthetic understanding of the complexity, yet commonality of human values. Works of art open the mind to new cognitive possibilities and this often requires imagining beyond what is consciously known. "Imagination helps us to create cognitive maps to comprehend contemporary reality", as Gilmour explains, because "the power of imagination [fulfils] one pedagogical task of postmodern art:" (1990:175). For example, aesthetic understanding of artistic form in the painting in figure 46 entitled Lohengrin requires that viewers are able to imagine beyond the known.

![Fig. 46 Lohengrin (2003)](image)

The title of this painting brings to mind an ancient Dutch fairy tale about the Swan King, similar to the Arthurian legends of the Grail. The story begins with Elsa, the queen
of Brabant, whose castle in Antwerp had been besieged by an evil knight. She calls on Lohengrin, who is called the Swan Knight to come quickly to her rescue, and protect her and her city. Lohengrin soon arrives in a boat pulled by a magic swan and defeats the evil knight. This painting has dream-like quality to it, giving it a sense of romance, somewhat like a bed-time fairytale told to children. Form in this painting draws on an ancient story of my European origins, which grew out of the unsentimental manipulation of the materiality of the paint. By using the forms that were created by colour and texture, this painting articulates a powerful personal and cultural narrative that speaks to the complex relationship between art, cultural history and nature.

This depiction of an old narrative was initially inspired by the head of a swan, which to me, was clearly visible in the chaos of colour and paint. From there, artistic form grew to incorporate a woman who is securely tucked into billowing blankets. Nature is represented by a tree, which grows across the bottom of the canvas, and extending along the entire left side of the picture. The swan looks lovingly on, as Elsa dreams of her knight who comes to her rescue in his swan-drawn floating carriage. Form in this painting has many personal and cultural connotations, which may be grasped if a viewer takes the time to look and think about it.

However, interpreting and understanding the meaning of a painting's text will, to some extent be somewhat ambiguous and subject to change because there is no ultimate and determinate right meaning. For many artists, their work is intended to initiate a reciprocal dialogue concerning certain historical events of western culture. By making these events visible and public, they hope that meaningful aesthetic form will heal the sense of malaise and disenchantment in contemporary life. Some of today's works of art demonstrate that the tension and conflict between the polarity of modernist idealism and contemporary reality can be successfully integrated within a work of art.
Form in a work of art, as Rosenthal points out, “can even approach the worst subjects and make them beautiful” (1987:60).

The nature of contemporary works of art may be complex; however the meaning of artistic form is often intentionally multi-layered. For example, *The Dinner Party* by the American artist Judy Chicago may be one of the most significant art works of the twentieth century. In this monumental and collaborative work of art, Chicago embodies many complex personal, art historical and cultural levels of intended meaning. This art work represents another cultural shift in the traditional interpretation of the history of art and philosophy. This is because its form presents an alternative feminine perspective of cultural history, seen in context with actual human experience that is both revolutionary and profound. Yet, for many years, this important work of art was not exhibited in public after it travelled all over North America. Not until 2002 was it permanently located in the Brooklyn Museum of Art, after many years of intense criticism of both the work and the artist. But this great work of art has stood the test of time, and its brilliance has not diminished. It still retains the power to elicit an emotional and cognitive response, provoking much contemplative thought and intense feeling.

*The Dinner Party* is an installation work consisting of a triangular table, with place-settings for thirty-nine mythical and historical women, dating from the beginning of time to the present day. This gigantic table sits on a floor of nine hundred and ninety-nine tiles; and each one of these tiles is also inscribed in honour of a notable woman. The sheer size of this work is impressive; the table alone measures forty-eight feet on all three sides. In addition, the depictions on the thirty-nine place settings are powerful visual images celebrating the valuable contributions that each woman has made to Western culture.
The women are seated in chronological order around the three-sided table; as cherished guests at a banquet held in their honour. Each one of the place settings is lush and lovingly made, and sits on an exquisitely beautiful hand-made embroidered runner that compliments the elaborately hand-painted china plates. The viewer enters this installation through a corridor hung with banners that invoke biblical language and text that articulates the momentousness of this event. The entire physical space of the room is intended to induce a visionary aesthetic experience, as viewers are asked to reflect and appreciate the beauty of sumptuous detail and the inherent message of its artistic form.

In the spirit of The Dinner Party, the painting in figure 47 entitled Commitment also pays tribute to the protective feminine principle, honouring woman as a vehicle of life. The figures have been heavily outlined, reminiscent of medieval stained glass windows of the mother and child that can be seen in the great cathedrals of Europe. The overall feeling of this painting is one of a close knit family, of a mother holding her child while father looks on in awe. The sun hanging between the two main figures suggests the light of the sun's life giving energy. The chalice-shaped sky reminds me of the chalice-like shape between the figures of Mary Magdalene and Jesus, in Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper. The iconic character of this painting is meant to celebrate the protective feminine energy, as well as the family as the foundation of society, where a child's education about the world begins.

A mother's central role in shaping the foundation of the family has all too often been taken for granted in contemporary culture, something Chicago tries to redress. She points out, "The Dinner Party takes us on a tour of Western civilization, a tour that bypasses what we have been taught to think of as the main road" (1979:56). However, she acknowledges that this art work is merely a limited representation of a small portion.
of feminine history. It may be true that the historical narrative has been severely limited because it was written by those in power. In the annals of Western history, often the less powerful have been marginalized and are all but forgotten.

![Fig. 47 Commitment (2003)](image)

To rectify this historical oversight, as Chicago points out, “would require a new world-view, one that acknowledges the history of both the powerful and the powerless peoples of the world” (1979:56). Although Chicago began *The Dinner Party* project alone in 1974, by the time it was finally exhibited in 1979, over four hundred volunteers
had collaborated with the artist. Chicago intended *The Dinner Party* to be appreciated as a monumental work of art of feminine remembrance that pays tribute to the many contributions women have made in art and philosophy over the centuries. She also stresses that this art work is intended to be a powerful pedagogical tool, because she wants to teach women about their long forgotten shared cultural heritage.

Chicago's nostalgia for an imagined feminine mythology echoes Kiefer's concern about the loss of a unifying grand narrative. She believes that Western culture needs a feminine perspective of the historical record, in order to formulate an objective and holistic view of reality. Chicago points out, "a true history would allow us to see the mingled efforts of peoples of all colors and sexes, all countries and races" (1979:56). Similar to Kiefer's aesthetic reflection on the character of human history, Chicago seeks to address a glaring omission in the historical record. She does this by creating art that reworks the feminine heritage in Western art, history and philosophy.

In this work of art, each woman is represented by an individual dinner-plate setting made especially for her, and each setting is unique and different from the others. The seating arrangements for the women is chronologically arranged; beginning with the mythological Primordial Goddess of prehistory, and ending with the twentieth century American modernist painter, Georgia O'Keefe. This art work focuses on bringing the value of the feminine character that has been missing in traditional art history and philosophy to people's attention.

Viewers are invited to think about the heroic achievements of women in Western society across time and place. Similar to Kiefer, Chicago and her collaborators have created monumental artistic form as a reminder of a missing part in the collective cultural memory. The many women that have been invited to Chicago's dinner party come from
the classical age, up to and including the late twentieth century. The first wing of the table represents the prehistoric primordial goddesses and the second wing the women of the Christian era. The third wing seats the women of the 'age of revolutions', paying final respect to such modernist artists and philosophers as Georgia O'Keefe, Virginia Woolf and Hannah Arendt.

*The Dinner Party* pays initial tribute to the prehistoric fertility goddess figurines, also known as 'Venuses' that have been found in excavations of ancient civilizations across Western Europe. These figurines are usually small amulets of faceless female figures with voluptuous bellies, round breasts and enormous buttocks. These miniscule sculptures are thought to represent the great Mother Goddess of creation as well as regeneration. The concept of a great Mother Goddess seems to have been a cultural development in many different parts of the world. The Goddess has been known under many different names, depending on the place where her artifacts have been found.

Next Chicago pays tribute to the great Babylonian goddess Ishtar, as the personification of the planet Venus in her double aspect of morning and evening star. Her counterpart is the Semitic goddess Astarte, who is mentioned in the Old Testament as Ashtoreth, and the ancient Greeks called Aphrodite. In Mesopotamia, Ishtar was worshipped for thousands of years as the protective feminine principle and infinitely powerful giver and taker of life. Ishtar was worshipped in highly developed cultures that had extensive knowledge of writing, mathematics and astronomy. These ancient European societies developed sophisticated legal codes, built irrigation canals and left behind works of art made by people who had a good eye for artistic form, which seems in retrospect, to be almost contemporary.
The seating arrangement of *The Dinner Party* pays special tribute to Ishtar as the first named female deity because, as Chicago notes, "the great figure of Ishtar acknowledged the potency of our foremothers [and] women had laid the groundwork for the development of a complex civilization" (1979:58). As the supreme image of ancient feminine centered religion, Ishtar was worshipped by both men and women alike, even when the status of women began to decline. Archeological and literary evidence supports that Ashtoreth, the Hebrew equivalent of Ishtar, was still worshipped between 1150 B.C.E. and 586 B.C.E., when the temples in honor of Yahweh and Ashtoreth stood side by side in Jerusalem.

Over time, the ancient perspective of the divine feminine changed from the veneration of a Great Mother Goddess, to worshipping a Father God. However, the remnants of her memory can be found in the early Christian notion of Sophia, as the abstract symbol of the highest form of feminine wisdom. Later Sophia was transformed into a purely spiritual dimension, rather than an active power in society and religion. As Chicago argues, "the concept of Sophia developed in the centuries after Christ, when early Gnostic religions believed in her as an incorporeal entity – the active thought of God – who created the world" (1979:61). It seems however that the vital life force of the feminine of old had already lost much of its original power, and Sophia was more spirit than a substantial being.

The table setting for Hildegard von Bingen has been auspiciously placed in the center of the second wing of the immense table where she faces Ishtar and Sophia, and I can't help but wonder what their dinner conversation might have been like. Hildegard von Bingen was an influential twelfth century German abbess who was also a visionary artist, as well as a talented musician, and one of the most original philosophical thinkers of early medieval Europe. In addition, she was also an eminent religious scholar,
scientist, botanist, a leading medical woman, as well as being a prolific poet and composer who was respected as a formidable political and religious figure of her day.

This wing of *The Dinner Party* Chicago also pays tribute to the great seventeenth century Italian artist Artemisia Gentileschi, who was trained to paint by her father during a time when women were for the most part denied access to education and apprenticeships. During her career she became a well established artist who traveled extensively, painting great historical and religious works as well many portraits. She also managed to gain admission to the Academy of Design in Florence, which was extremely unusual in her day.

The last table pays homage to twentieth century artists such as Emily Carr, Sonia Delaunay, Frida Kahlo, Kathe Kollwitz, Berthe Morisot, Gabriele Minter, Louise Nevelson, Suzanne Valadon, Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham and Katharine Hepburn. Chicago also pays tribute to the great modernist philosophers Hannah Arendt, Mary Esther Harding, Suzanne Langer and Simone Weil. Artistic form in *The Dinner Party* articulates Chicago’s uniquely personal perception of the Western historical record, which has indeed given many contemporary viewers a glimpse of the meaning of a shared cultural heritage.

Chicago incorporates traditional feminine art-making practices such as delicate embroidery and porcelain painting, in order to create beautiful visual images intended to be interpreted and understood on many levels. The exquisite sensuous detail of design and traditional needlework used in *The Dinner Party* is not only a visual delight, but also broadens a viewer’s perception as well as aesthetic understanding that goes far beyond Chicago’s intended educational imperative.
The embroidery of the runners is a luscious visual celebration of each one of these women's accomplishments, however the reverse side of the runners often tell a different story. For example, the front of Mary Wollstonecraft's runner contains delicately beautiful embroidered eighteenth century flowers and birds; but the back is starkly appliquéd with the image of her death bed, as she gives birth to the author Mary Shelley. Chicago intentionally used the aesthetic power of traditional feminine hand-work and china-painting to provide contemporary viewers with form that speaks across time and place of a shared cultural heritage. By paying sincere tribute to all mothers, daughters and grandmothers, artistic form articulates its complex meaning to the many generations to come. I would suggest that The Dinner Party represents a new aesthetic language of art, which can effectively articulate and share the value of the feminine in Western history.

It seems to me that this work of art has tremendous educational value, because it shows the value and contributions made by women most people may not have been aware of. Similar to The Dinner Party's celebration of the contributions made by historical women, the painting in figure 49 entitled Earth Watch also articulates the necessity for the protectiveness of the feminine principle for ecological balance. In this painting, three gigantic cloudlike female forms encircle the globe, in a collective gesture of profound concern. The bleak moon and slight suggestion of a sun in the background reinforce the grim expressions on the women' faces, as they protectively encircle the Earth.

The woman looking out at the viewer is flanked by two figures seen in profile, which stand on either side of her. Together they embrace the planet as if in an attempt to hold it safe from harm. There is a sense of great pathos in this painting which is a
reminder of the devastation and chaos that today’s global consumerism has brought upon people, as well as the natural environment.

Fig. 48 Earth Watch [2003]

This painting is a critical observation that there is an urgent need for rebalancing masculine and feminine energies. However, these three feminine figures also make me think of Shakespeare’s three witches, or the powerful old crones in European fairy tales.
The haunting installations of Tracey Emin are similar to Chicago's Dinner Party in that she also combines traditional feminine handicrafts such as embroidery and quilt-making. Emin's art may be interpreted as unifying visual art and literature because she uses words and text in order to articulate the meaning of its artistic form. Emin often uses language to express her subjective and very private thoughts and feelings about traumatic events in her life, which are intended to be socially relevant aesthetic statements. As McGrath observes, "when visual art appears in the midst of writing we assume it's just illustrative. Emin closes up the compass. She challenges us to think of writing as visual art and visual art [as] text" (2002:54).

Sometimes Emin intends to shock viewers, yet people sense the authenticity of her struggle for self-consciousness and greater understanding through her art-making practice. I believe that reflective viewers intuitively understand that these works of art are authentic attempts to articulate who Tracey Emin really is. However, the art work of Emin is something of a paradox. On the one hand she exposes herself to public view, yet on the other hand, she remains in control as the mediator between artistic self expression of her thoughts and feelings of experience in relation to the cultural record.

Similar to Chicago, Emin is also a great storyteller who uses the traditional feminine handicrafts of appliqué and embroidery, unifying them both literally and metaphorically with words and text of a literary language. She constantly reinvents and edits her often extremely personal articulations of greater self awareness, for all to see. However, form in Emin's work also speaks of shared human thoughts and feelings, of pleasure as well as pain, in sometimes disturbingly graphic visual images that she finds in her mind. Her art work depicts her personal memory of often horrendous life events, which at the same time also reflect the experience of contemporary life in general.
For example, *Don't Sell Me Your Fucking Fear* is her caustic reply to the tragic events in New York City on September 11, 2001. Similar to Kiefer and Chicago, Emin intends to express a fresh new perspective into contemporary Western culture, where nothing is sacred and everything is for sale. Although Emin intends to shock viewers with her disturbing visual utterances, she also wants to present an authentic reflection of social issues such as consumerism and selfish greed in contemporary life. Her art work gives viewers a unique postmodernist perspective, because she associates the meaning of events in her life in context with contemporary culture in general. Emin, like Kiefer and Chicago, attempts to transform the often tragic events in her life into meaningful aesthetic form that is intended to provoke much contemplative thought.

Some artists today such as Chicago, Emin and Kiefer express greater self consciousness and aesthetic understanding in art work that may also have a pedagogical function in the sense of passing on the wisdom of the elders to the next generation. These contemporary works of art remind people that they have an obligation to others in aesthetic form that goes far beyond the search for personal self expression.

It seems to me if the shaping of aesthetic form is able to express greater personal and cultural understanding, then learning the 'subtler' language of art becomes vitally important for contemporary education. Therefore, I would propose that studying art-making and the aesthetic appreciation of art work in today's schools is at least as important as learning to read, write or do arithmetic. With that in mind, the next chapter looks at the educational value of teaching new aesthetic language games in the contemporary classroom.
CHAPTER FIVE
ART EDUCATION AND AESTHETIC UNDERSTANDING

Artistic creativity and self expression have a valuable educational function because shaping aesthetic form teaches students to articulate themselves in a 'subtler' language of art. This often requires learning new language games, in order to say exactly what is intended so others are able to grasp what an utterance means. Because once an utterance has been made, the speaker's intentions may no longer be relevant, and what has been expressed must stand on its own.

However, sometimes words and text in a language are insufficient to express what a person thinks or feels and a true articulation may involve finding an appropriate form in a particular artistic medium. The shaping and appreciation of form in schools develops a greater ability for aesthetic understanding because it teaches students' to see with an 'enlightened eye'. Therefore, making and enjoying art work in the classroom is of vital importance for personal and cultural well-being, and a broad education in the arts is crucial for the contemporary curriculum.

Lyotard and new language games

The cultural shift of modernism begins in the early Renaissance, and found expression in Kant's aesthetic philosophy. Many modernist works of art reflect this shift in thinking from individual anonymity, to a personal artistic quest for self consciousness and individuation. The invention of photography and camera technology freed painting from the demand for realistic depiction of people and things in nature. In response, many painters begin to explore the abstract qualities of texture, pattern and colour on a flat two-dimensional surface. Rather than being a mere realistic depiction of nature, a canvas becomes an heroic arena for artistic creativity and defining self awareness. As
paintings become increasingly abstracted, this cultural shift in aesthetic understanding eventually lead to the nihilism of conceptual art.

The increasingly abstract, inward nature of modernist aesthetic thought is finally challenged by postmodern artists and philosophers. For example, Derrida and Lyotard deconstruct the traditions of the past, in order to find new answers to perennial questions concerning the relationship between the individual and society. While contemporary artists like Emin, Chicago and Kiefer retain the modernist intensity of a personal quest for individuation, their artistic vision extends beyond mere personal expressions of greater self consciousness. With the advent of today's information age, previously suppressed knowledge has become readily available, and many artists look back at ancient world mythologies and grand narratives for personal expression and meaningful artistic form.

Reaching to a half-remembered mythical past, some contemporary artists have used art-making to critique the inaccuracy of Western culture's historical record. For these artists, form not only expresses a greater self consciousness, but is also intended as a powerful educational tool for teaching an alternative perspective of Western art history and philosophy. Take, for example, the painting in Figure 49 entitled Eostre: Sunna Wakes. This painting was inspired by the early European mythical origins of Easter as a shared seasonal and religious celebration of spring.

Eostre was the great mother goddess of the dawn as well as fertility, who was worshipped by the Saxons in Northern Europe at the spring equinox. The word eostre comes from the ancient Saxon word for spring, however Eostre was known by many names including Ostare, Eostra, Eastra and Eastur. In addition, the name Sunna makes reference to a Scandinavian goddess who was also known as Sunne or Frau Sonne,
and she represents the sun. This painting may be understood as a visual metaphor for the return of the sunshine in the spring, as the sun goddess wakes from her winter slumber. The rabbit at her side confirms the image's intended meaning of fertility and regeneration of the earth, as well as the people. This may be because traditionally, spring has been a time of reseeding the earth.

Spring is a time when fresh sprouts of the summer crop appear above the ground, and animals and children are born. It is also the time of year when light and darkness are in balance, which is still celebrated today with communal gatherings around large bonfires. A traditional paasvuur is still lit on the second day of Easter in
many towns in Northern Europe, and some people still believe jumping over the dying embers assures fertility.

Today there are unprecedented opportunities to see depictions of different ways of life and cultural rituals from all over the world, partly because twentieth century computer technology has opened up new information channels. Like never before, computerization makes a wealth of visual images available to almost everyone on the planet. The world-wide web has woven humanity together by making previously unknown information publicly available on a global scale. This expanded global perspective may further evolve people's aesthetic understanding, from a modernist obsession with self consciousness, to a renewed sense of community and cultural transformation whereby every voice can be heard.

Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* written during the 1980's, foreshadows the advent of computerization and the miniaturization of technology, warning that these changes would greatly affect Western culture. In the appendix, Lyotard describes modernism and postmodernism as being part of a natural cycle of renewal and decay. He describes postmodernism as, "a period of slackening and an end to experimentation in the arts and everywhere" (2002:71). However, Lyotard rejects the modernist expectation that industrialization and technology will help make people happy.

It is true that the advances in technology have merely resulted in people living increasingly inauthentic lives, and a sense of malaise and disenchantment has taken root within today's society. Although Lyotard's insightful assessment presents a bleak outlook of the future, the appendix offers humanity a semblance of hope. He proposes that aesthetic enjoyment and understanding of form in art as well as in nature may be the saving factor for the disenchantment of postmodern society. Lyotard deconstructs
the laws of nature, and is aware that infinite human experimentation in the world and in the arts is in a constant state of flux of decay and renewing. However, appreciating meaningful artistic form remains a constant point of reference, and therefore aesthetic understanding may be an antidote to today's despair.

For Lyotard, deconstructing the past is a necessary part of the cycle of cultural renewal, and he notes, "modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief" (2002:77). In addition, the deconstructive nature of postmodernity may be part of, as Crowther suggests, a "broader play of constantly changing codes and signifying practices [in an] ever-accelerating demand for the new and unexpected" (1995:10). This constant demand for the new however, has led to sensationalism and ever greater extremes, not only in the media but also in the arts. It seems increasingly difficult to configure and distinguish worthwhile art from the excess and diversity of daily information.

However, some contemporary works of art attempt to bridge the gap between the achievements of the past, and today's pluralistic aesthetic sensibility. Artists today have unlimited freedom to assimilate and appropriate artistic form from Western, Eastern and earlier times and places. However, sometimes artistic form articulates a more general aesthetic idea. For example, whereas many other paintings have drawn their inspiration from the mythical past, the image in the painting in figure 50 entitled *Illumination* makes no particular reference to any specific world mythology, or even to the history of art. Instead artistic form in this painting offers a renewed aesthetic vision of personal and cultural truth.

This painting depicts a luminous figure stepping out of the background, as she extends her arms towards the viewer. This vaguely feminine form stands alone in the
center of the canvas as if giving a benediction, reminiscent of certain popular religious Jesus and Mary figurines. In the background, stylized forms appear that suggest a group of children, and a large elongated heart-shape extends from her left hand.

Sometimes expressing the interconnectedness between an aesthetic idea and the potential for artistic form may demand the invention of a fresh new language game. The jubilation at discovering a new aesthetic language game, as Lyotard points out, "result[s] from the invention of new rules of the game, be it pictorial, artistic, or any other" (2002:80). This requires keeping an open mind and freeing the imagination to discover a unique image that articulates the meaning behind perennial recurring human events.
A new aesthetic language

The contemplative appreciation of artistic form initiates a dialogue between the artist and viewers, if they sincerely attempt to grasp the complexity of aesthetic meaning of what the artist may have tried to express. However, it may also be helpful to have personal knowledge concerning an artist's background and life events, in order to fully comprehend a work of art. For example, the painting in figure 51 entitled Creation illustrates the value of having additional information that only the artist can provide. As the title implies, this image may be interpreted as a response to Michelangelo's painting of creation on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Here he depicts the moment of creation as a Zeus-like god reaching from a brain-shaped cloud to touch Adam's hand.

Rather than the traditional version of an old bearded man giving life to Adam, this painting counters this erroneous idea by depicting a crouching female, surrounded by her three children. This painting may be interpreted as an imaginary family portrait because these three children are clearly my own. Although the figures have been highly stylized, I easily recognize my son to the right of the woman, and my two daughters to her left. The children seem to have materialized as if from her body, perhaps articulating a more realistic view of human creation.

Although form in this painting depicts actual people, none of these figures was consciously preconceived. Instead these figures developed slowly as one after another spontaneously came to mind, as the hands and eyes imaginatively worked the materiality of the paint. I like the many levels of meaning this painting embodies. On the one hand, it can be read as a social critique of Western culture's perpetuation of a distorted view of creation that subjugates the feminine. But more importantly, this
painting also confirms the enduring love and commitment between a mother and her children, a bond even time and space is unable to break.

Fig. 51 Creation [2003]

The essence of authentic self expression in shaping artistic form is often profoundly self-referential, yet it can at the same time embody and communicate a more general cultural meaning for others. Understanding the essence of the many different levels of interpretation requires that viewers use their imaginative ability to empathize with the speaker. Developing an empathetic imagination enables viewers to enjoy the
sensuousness of artistic form in context with intellectual concepts the image may bring to mind.

Aesthetic appreciation and understanding is an affirmative response to the fundamental ideas embodied in a work of art that have been made accessible in the sensuousness and materiality of the art medium itself. However, aesthetic sensitivity may take time to develop; therefore it is crucial that art education begins in a child’s early years. Active engagement with shaping and enjoying artistic form teaches towards an aesthetic sensibility, and develops sympathetic viewers who have a certain degree of understanding of art in context with the time and place it was made.

There is an energetic cognitive and affective harmony of mind, when a viewer aesthetically understands what is communicated in a visual image. There seems to be a momentary harmony between two distinctly different mental movements, resulting in a pleasant cognitive tension. It feels good when the imagination reaches beyond current knowledge, in order to grasp potentially new and valuable insights. Imaginatively going beyond cognitive limits reveals that the human capacity for reason is far greater than what was previously thought. For example, the empathetic viewer who spends a little time thinking about the meaning behind the image depicted in the painting in figure 52 entitled *The Promised Land* may grasp the urgency of the message its artistic form articulates.

The restlessness of form and the dynamic movement of the figures confirm that this image depicts a time of personal and cultural transformation. Behind the main two figures, more human forms seem to be fading into the background, suggestive of severed social relationships. However, to counteract the pathos of personal and cultural
loss, a spiral form offers hope, as these two figures dash arm in arm towards an unknown future.

![Painting](image)

**Fig. 52 The Promised Land [2004]

It seems to me that artistic form may be grounded in a collectively shared cultural memory of ancient mythologies and traditional grand narratives. There is reason to believe that these forms reside in the unconscious part of the human mind, and can be made visible in the act of shaping aesthetic form. These images express not only an artist's personal thoughts and feelings, but also display the acquisition of technical skill and rationality. For many artists, bringing a mental image into artistic form is an imaginative attempt to gain a better perspective of life's events.
For example, form in the painting in figure 53 entitled *Solutions* offers a broader understanding of human events, in an image that articulates a personal vision of possible worlds. Although its title suggests an optimistic outlook, the painting itself seems to have a foreboding character, perhaps because the figures have been darkly outlined against a bleak greyish sky. To support this interpretation, there is a huge blue moon hovering above the seemingly fleeing figures. This painting is intended to speak of the human predicament of the millions of people today, who are refugees from poverty and war.

Although reference was made earlier to the connotations associated with the blue moon, no mention was made of the obvious meaning that blue moons are a rare natural event. Unfortunately, the displacement of people is no longer a rare event in today’s globalized society, but *diasporas* occur daily all over the planet. However, it is also a scientific fact that a blue moon may be caused by smoke or particles of dust in the earth’s atmosphere, especially after a forest fire or volcanic eruption. For example, folklore has it that the Krakatoa eruption of 1883 in Indonesia was the reason that the moon appeared blue for nearly two years.

It seems this catastrophic meaning fits better with the aesthetic sense of this painting; however the title suggests that this narrative may yet have a happy ending. However, in the end, it is up to a viewer to imagine the meaning of its artistic form. Artistic form seems to have the power to draw viewers into the rhythm and drama expressed in the materiality of paint, understanding its meaning in context with a story these figures seem to articulate. Many of these paintings attempt to express the complex paradoxical nature of what it means to be human in today’s culture in an original and pleasing aesthetic form.
The implied drama in certain paintings is intended to take viewers outside themselves, so they too may see beyond the limitations of personal horizons. However, this calls for going beyond the merely representational, in order to express an unknown aesthetic truth which is only partially remembered. As McMahon points out, “art isn’t in what you’re seeing - it’s what’s been awakened inside of you” (1995:22).
Sometimes it may be a shock to the intellect that releases the imagination, and moves the mind to reach for a new concept that communicates an aesthetic idea. Active imaginative engagement in making and appreciating works of art develops the ability to reach for richer and more productive artistic forms. Extending the mind beyond its cognitive limits may also provide for a greater appreciation of living a more humane life. By living a 'humane' life I mean consciously striving to embody only the very best human qualities. For example, cultivating the virtues of mercy, tolerance and compassion while living a civilized and happy life, and extending this right to others.

The incessant noise of pluralist voices in contemporary culture needs to be balanced by ample opportunities for aesthetic creativity and reflection, in the arts as well as in the natural world. Artistic creativity and aesthetic enjoyment create a place for silence where the imagination is free to roam. When the imagination is released, the mind is more able to bridge the gap between the illusion of difference between self and others, in order to clearly comprehend the underlying commonalities of humanity.

**Ethics, morality and aesthetic understanding**

It was Kant who first made the connection between aesthetic understanding and morality. Kant proposed that an expanded aesthetic comprehension of form enlivens the mind, igniting nobler feelings as the mind grasps new insights into morality and general social values. I support the idea that aesthetic understanding enables the mind to grasp a potentially greater human rationality, which makes people aware that they are more than what they appear to be on the surface of things.

The painting in figure 54 entitled *Opposition* illustrates what I mean by artistic form providing greater comprehension of morality in context with general social issues. As these five figures came into form, certain thoughts and feelings came to the surface
of consciousness, and as they became visible in the painting the meaning of this image could then be critically appraised.

Fig. 54 Opposition [2004]

On the right, a female form stands defiantly with her hands on her hips, as she faces a group of four figures, who seem to arguing with her. There seems to be a tug of war going on between the woman and the group, on one level suggesting the tension between the individual and society. However, this image also speaks of a family who is united in their opposition to the plans of the defiant figure on the right. Although the woman is still attached to the group; she no longer seems to belong with them.

Her only ally is a waxing crescent moon, an image which traditionally represents a new beginning of another stage in life. This image may be understood on many
different levels, but for me these figures are intensely autobiographical. In addition, form in this painting clearly demonstrates a greater power within the mind that links to morality, because artistic form is able to express hidden and often painful thoughts and feelings about certain events in life.

The underlying morality behind aesthetic understanding reveals that people are only free to the extent that their actions do not infringe on others. Appreciating the significance of these principles reveals that this moral law exerts a powerful and attractive positive force on human consciousness. This moral law provides that people are free to act within the constraints of reason. It also emphasizes that mutual respect is the foundation of all moral and ethical propositions for the general good. As free rational and moral beings, people are indeed supersensible, capable of self determination and positive change in the world. Everyone is essentially a moral and reasonable human being who has the power to act well in the world, and make good judgments about the validity of contemporary norms and values. As Winter observes, "it is reason itself that underwrites our freedom" (1995:78-79). I believe self-determining freedom is a moral issue because it can only be achieved through social interactions, within a mutual open dialogue with others.

The moral freedom to articulate self awareness, as well as being heard requires an agreement between speakers to play by the rules of a language game within a commonly shared social contract. Communicating self awareness in a common language is a creative act of self determining freedom that asks viewers to imagine a different perspective of reality. Using allegory, metaphor or artistic form may facilitate the imaginative ability of others to project their self awareness into the meaning of the syntax of an utterance. However, this will require mutual trust that a particular language game is true to the speaker's intended meaning.
As Lyas points out, “these agreements need not be universal, can be changeable, can alter as our lives alter, can be affected by the lives we have had and will have. But that there are these agreements is all that underpins this language” (1997:130). The agreements people make in sharing language games may not be universal, but it does require that people set aside their personal bias and listen, if not disinterestedly, then with empathy and a sincere attempt to understand what has been communicated. In addition, contemporary language games often involve complex ethical negotiations between speaker and listener that may require a well developed sense of empathy.

In order to illustrate this point, the painting in figure 55 entitled Mimesis plays a visual language game of self disclosure by metaphorically articulating a collectively shared cultural memory of an ancient myth. In Greek mythology, Mimesis was the ancient goddess who, along with her two sisters, rescued Hephaestus from drowning. Hephaestus as a new born baby was thrown from Mount Olympus into the sea by his mother Hera, because he was born deformed. The story is that the goddess Mimesis happened to be swimming around one day, when she sees a baby in distress and brings him home to her two sisters, who live deep below the sea. Together they raise him, and eventually Hephaestus grows up to be a gifted black smith and metal artist. One day, he returns to the world where his works of art become much in demand by the gods and goddesses on Mount Olympus, including his own mother Hera.

In this painting, Mimesis rises from the sea with her back to the viewer, who is asked to imagine that she is holding little Hephaestus in her arms. She seems to be leaning towards a lone figure in the distance to her left. It is as if she is offering the child to his natural mother, but Hera has turned her back and is walking away. The two figures in the central right of the canvas depict her sisters, who look on with concern.
Mimesis trails a garment of watery fish behind her, as she steps out of the primordial sea, bringing new life and regeneration.

The idea of the primordial sea occurs in many ancient creation myths, because water symbolizes the creative chaos and the potentiality for new life. And indeed, contemporary science has confirmed that all life, including humanity did originate from
the sea. In this painting, the idea of the watery chaos of potentiality has been reinforced by wave-like gestures, with several fish-shapes embedded in the foreground. Many artists and thinkers today support the idea that ethics and morality must guide the reciprocal dialogue in today's commonly understood language. Mutual self disclosure demonstrates the value of tolerance of the many different voices in today's globalized society, although individuals may not always agree with the moral principles of others.

A 'subtler' language of artistic form

In general, postmodernist thought supports the notion that there are multiple ways of understanding an utterance, and that ultimately there is no one true and certain language because the human mind will always be limited. Eisner concludes that at best, "belief is about as good as we can ever get" (1998:4). It is true that there is tremendous diversity among the world cultures and people speak many different languages, however the syntax of a 'subtler' language of art can communicate a collective vision of the world in ethical as well as aesthetic terms.

The complex nature of language notwithstanding, the function of all language, and the language of art is no exception, is to express and communicate the meaning of an intellectual concept in aesthetic terms. However, as Richmond cautions, "under the aesthetic perspective, art is never considered simply as the communication of literal meaning, as the vehicle of social ideologies, or as text" (1993:105). Although an art work may also have a useful or a social function, artistic form should first of all be appreciated for its own sake. What should be of concern in an aesthetic encounter is the art work's uniqueness, and the relationship between structure and form in context with how it was shaped. The commonality of aesthetic appreciation and understanding of artistic form demonstrates that the language of art has validity in its own right.
The process of aesthetic comprehension of form begins with perception through all the senses. Aesthetic perception provides fleeting impressions of what people seem to ‘know’ intuitively. These fleeting sensible intuitions are non-conceptual; however they do have certain general characteristics that the imagination uses to find a suitable intellectual concept. As Carson states, “these characteristics become the concept [which] is the defining characteristic that makes the object what it is” (2006:84). In addition, intellectual and affective understanding is complete when the imagination finds a word or a visual image within the embodied mind that can accurately articulate this concept.

In my own work, the imagination brings these intellectual concepts into form as a visual image in the painting begins to take shape. As the work progresses, often a title or a phrase will come to mind, although it may be modified later as a painting develops. A title often has complex personal associations, and the painting in figure 56 entitled Influence is no exception. The various figures in this painting express the power that family members have to influence others, especially the younger children.

On the left, a mother embraces a child, who seems to have materialized from her body, as a man stands behind them looking on. There is a masked female figure sitting cross-legged watching this tender familial scene, as she extends her arms over her head, seemingly to reach a heart-shape hovering above in the background. Behind her in the top right hand corner sits another woman, reminiscent of an old crone or an ancient mother goddess. As in most of the other paintings, all the figures in this painting have emerged from the fluidity of the paint itself.
I particularly like the crackled effect in the paint in the lower right hand corner and see it as a metaphor for the cycle of decay. In that sense, I think this painting also depicts the human life cycle of birth, death and regeneration.

Fig. 56 Influence [2004]

Although the meaning of this painting is intentionally ambiguous and multifaceted, this image may be interpreted as depicting several stages of family life. Similar to the paintings of Giotto and other medieval artists, this image depicts different vignettes of an imaginary family. I believe that disinterested aesthetic engagement with a work of art strengthens a person's innate ability for imaginative perception of the moral
and social value of what may have been expressed. Ethics and aesthetics may not be one and same in a Wittgensteinian sense, but they do seem to be two sides of the same coin.

Aesthetic understanding involves imaginatively making order out of the chaos of the multiple sensible impressions perceived in the medium. Rather than passively looking on, authentic self expression in shaping and enjoying a work of art requires learning to see the possibility for meaning in its artistic form. The fundamental nature of aesthetic perception is an active engagement in a visual dialogue with the structure and form that an art work takes. As Eisner points out, “if the visual arts teach one lesson, it's that seeing is central to making [and] seeing, rather than mere looking, requires an enlightened eye” (1998:1-2).

**The 'enlightened' eye**

Artistic self expression is ideally a creative quest for enlightenment, and this expanded sense of self awareness seems to be encoded within the medium of the art work itself, making personal vision public for the benefit of others in the community. In addition, art works embody the personal choices an artist has made in shaping and inventing artistic form. When form has been successfully brought forth from the sensuousness of the medium, it seems to affirm a person's intellectual power to make good ethical and aesthetic choices.

It is fascinating how the sensuousness of shaping artistic form can articulate aesthetic and ethical judgments. For example, the painting in figure 57 entitled *Fallujah* quietly speaks of my thoughts and feelings about the morality concerning the atrocities committed during the occupation of a certain Middle Eastern town. This image refers to
an incident when sulphuric acid and phosphorous bombs were dropped on Fallujah, killing and burning many innocent victims beyond recognition.

Fig. 57 Fallujah [2004]

This painting shows a woman hovering over what might once have been her children. Her figure is framed by sulphuric clouds and napalm bombs alight in the midnight sky. Grief engulfs her, and I can only imagine how she must feel as she watches everything she loves die before her eyes. This image still has the power to move me, just as it did on the day it was painted. In some ways this painting reminds me of Picasso's *Guernica*, perhaps because the meaning behind its form shouts out my indignation and grief at the consequences of war, as Picasso did so many years ago.
Human perception is complex because people never just look at one particular thing. The eyes are in a constant state of movement, taking in many impressions that arouse curiosity, but also require the viewer’s judgment concerning the relationship between different things. As Berger points out, “we only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice [as] a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach” (1982:8). Active perception, particularly of artistic form, often involves a passionate response to something outside one’s self, which is nonetheless intuitively recognized as being part of our own inner life.

Aesthetic understanding involves the mental capacity to engage in a sympathetic dialogue with a work of art and its creator, by setting aside personal interests and taking the necessary time for reflective contemplation. The power of an aesthetic experience lies in the ability to project one’s self awareness into a visual language of form which has the power to open the heart, as well as the mind. This is no surprise, considering that the arts have always been crucial, as a means to greater understanding of the human predicament.

Sympathetic engagement with artistic form opens perception to a different perspective and interpretation of reality that has the potential to expand a person’s cognitive horizons. In addition, aesthetic comprehension teaches greater tolerance, if not respect for the value of personal and cultural difference, and the diversity of artistic form within a multicultural society. “Aesthetic understanding,” as Greene points out, is the “capacity to imagine what is not yet [and] become aware of possibility” (2000:26).

The diversity of works of art stimulates the imagination to seek meaning beyond a fixed world view, as participants accept and enjoy both the similarity and difference of
art-making beyond the familiar. For example, the painting in figure 58 entitled *The Matrix* describes what I mean by enjoying a different perspective of reality.

The word *matrix* comes from the Latin *matricaria* and translates as the 'womb' and *mater* means 'mother' as the original source of life. Webster's Dictionary defines the word 'matrix' as, "that within which, or within and from which, something originates, takes form, or develops" (1972:1110). Here artistic form, as in so many other paintings, has been defined by the rhythm and movement of the paint medium, as the colours mixed as they dried on a horizontal canvas.

For me, the visual image itself literally demonstrates the intended meaning of the painting's title. In this picture, several female figures have been brought into relationship
from the rhythmic chaos of the paint. As in previous paintings, these triple figures may refer to different stages in a woman's life. The figure in the foreground is in the process of becoming from the matrix or mother, as a more fully formed female stands quietly watching at the right side of the canvas.

The numinous quality of these figures is suggestive of birth and regeneration in the mother's womb, as well as in the world of nature. The woman in the foreground clasps the hand of the figure above as if seeking support, perhaps to express how people need others to fully materialize and develop a personal sense of self. These figures appear to be reaching into the light of reason, as their forms materialize from the dark void that surrounds them. I would suggest that expressing common human values in shaping a work of art articulates what cannot be fully said in words.

Artistic creativity requires trusting the subtle suggestions of the imagination, following its promptings in the act of conceptualizing form as it appears in the medium. Therefore, the creative art-making process should be fluid and form itself flexible and shifting in order to give an artist clues in shaping the material. As Eisner explains, "in the arts, ends may follow means. One may act and the act may itself suggest ends, ends that did not precede the act, but follow it" (2004:6).

An intuitive aesthetic response to form, no matter from which culture or tradition, requires imaginatively adopting a sympathetic attitude. In contemplative reflection and thoughtful attention to form, viewers may grasp a new vision of self in relation to others. This may counter the forming of negative stereotypical generalizations that serve only to polarize between them and us. Living well together in today's globalized society requires knowledge and appreciation of the valuable contributions made by many different people and cultures. Postmodern thought respects people's freedom to choose their own way
of life, and their right for personal self expression of form in art-making and aesthetic understanding.

Living together harmoniously in a multi-cultural community requires that the individual cultivates ethical and aesthetic understanding, respecting cultural difference and the honest effort to make good personal choices for the sake of others. It requires, as Richmond argues, "being willing to restrain certain cultural ambitions out of a concern for the well being of the community as a whole" (1995:20). Cultivating greater tolerance of the diversity of personal and cultural difference may redefine what it means to live a happy life in a multicultural democracy.

Active engagement in the arts of other cultures and enjoying the diversity of aesthetic expression may go a long way towards creating a community that respects the diversity and vitality of many world views. After all, cultures across time and place have had a predisposition to express themselves through rhythm, song as well as visual art, and artistic creativity seems to be a shared human activity. In addition, sharing aesthetic enjoyment in the arts also expresses a common human need for friends, family and love. For example, the painting in figure 59 entitled Legacy articulates a shared human concern that most everyone intuitively appreciates and understands. Most cultures and people across the globe honour the idea of passing on a personal and cultural legacy to the next generation.

The word legacy comes from the Latin word legatum, which means handing down something of value from an ancestor, as in a legacy of power or a duty. There appears to be a current running from the seated child, through the hand of the mother, to the figures in the background. The triangular form of this painting implies a solid foundation, which is rooted in the child who becomes the heir to this legacy. The figures
recede into the distance, suggestive of the passing of the generations into the mists of time. Form in this painting articulates that genetics and cultural values have been passed through from one to the other since time began.

![Image of painting](image.png)

Fig. 59 Legacy [2004]

A biblical saying comes to mind, which states that the sins of the father will have to be paid by his heirs for seven generations. However this image seems to exude a sense of love and peaceful harmony, as the mother gently smiles and lovingly strokes
the child's head. It seems that sharing aesthetic experience and understanding also
develops a sense of empathy and concern about the pain and suffering of others less
fortunate in the world. Many artists across time and place have expressed their all too
poignant concerns for the suffering of the world in many different kinds of art works.

Whether in paintings, sculpture, a tragic play or a haunting symphony, viewers
are presented with an opportunity for aesthetic understanding. Grasping the meaning of
artistic form takes people out of themselves, perhaps into the ancient mythologies or
spiritual beliefs and historical record as viewed by another person. Sometimes, artistic
form may articulate an ineffable and mysterious vision of a new mythology that might
better explain reality for a new generation living in a globalized information age.

For example, the painting in figure 60 entitled The Future shows what I mean by
artistic form which expresses an ineffable and mysterious mythological vision. This
canvas is almost entirely taken up by the two figures who sit together in a posture of
mutual reverence. The woman on the left holds a child in her arms, while the figure on
the right watches, holding a golden ball. This golden ball makes me think of a fairy tale
about a princess who encounters a frog, whom she asks to retrieve her golden ball from
a deep pond. She thanks him by kissing his nose, and he promptly turns into a
handsome prince. Of course, they lived happily ever after, which may explain the heart­
shape tucked under her arm.

This painting embodies a sense of utopia, and its form seems to articulate a
positive and optimistic view of a possible future world, as being a more loving place to
be. A rainbow appears behind the woman holding the child, as a crescent moon shines
on her hair. All is peace and harmony as they sit silently together on this moonlit night.
It is significant that the image of the rainbow in the mythologies from cultures all over the
world was understood as a bridge between humanity on Earth, and the realm of the divine.

In ancient Greece, the rainbow was perceived as the pathway of Iris, who is the personal messenger of Hera and Zeus on Mount Olympus. It is believed that the rainbow, personified by Iris, unites heaven and earth. She travels on the wind from one end of the world to the other, and from the depths of the underworld deep within the sea. In Norse mythology, the rainbow is a bridge connecting Asgard, the realm of the gods and goddesses with Midgard, the home of humanity. However, sometimes grasping the
complexity of aesthetic meaning goes beyond mere conceptualization because human understanding will always be, to some extent culturally determined and limited by personal knowledge. Therefore, understanding and making an aesthetic judgment, as Kant correctly points out, requires releasing the mental power of the imagination to leap beyond personal and cultural limitations.

Conclusion: studying artistic form builds aesthetic understanding

Educating towards developing aesthetic understanding involves a sensitive awareness of the complexity of personal and cultural meaning of artistic form. In my view, the more art students are exposed to the possibility of aesthetic experience, the better their minds will be able to reach beyond personal and cultural limitations. Artistic creativity and the cultivation of aesthetic understanding in the classroom strengthen the imagination's ability to make the necessary mental connections between intuitive sensibility and the intellect.

Building a greater aesthetic understanding is a valuable cognitive and affective ability that goes beyond the practice of art-making, and is useful in other areas of life. Art students should be free to experiment and encouraged to trust their own way of doing things, as they learn that artistic creativity has no recipe that can be followed. Students also learn from their mistakes, as well as savour their success when they get form in a work of art 'exactly right'. The practice of shaping aesthetically pleasing form teaches the perseverance and discipline needed to master the rules and skills of a particular medium, which may take many years.

Art-making and the appreciation of form requires releasing the imagination in order to respond spontaneously respond to the aesthetic possibilities of an art medium, without having a predetermined concept in mind. For example, the dream-like feeling in
the painting in figure 61 entitled *Sisters* materialized from a receptive and contemplative state of mind. As previously mentioned the idea of sisters returns time and again in my work as a metaphor for both personal and cultural relationships.

![Fig. 61 Sisters [2005]](image)

Often artistic form articulates much more than may have been consciously intended, and an art work’s full meaning may only be partially grasped. Sometimes, form in a work of art mysteriously goes beyond mere words and text, in order to express the ineffable. Artistic form seems capable of communicating ineffable meaning in a visual language that may only be grasped through allegory and metaphor. Art-making
and the appreciation of form involves making aesthetic judgments that reach beyond instrumental reason, in order to portray things people sometimes do not understand.

In addition, artistic creativity also develops the ability to notice the seemingly common place beauty of things in the environment, making people more aware of the pleasure of the moment. A greater awareness of the qualitative goodness of form inspires aesthetic appreciation, lifting a person's spirits beyond everyday reality and personal concerns. I believe that the regular practice of art-making and aesthetic appreciation strengthens participants' mental ability to respond appropriately to the often chaotic events in life.

The object of art education is to be open-ended and flexible, yet set attainable limits for each student within the collective framework of classroom creativity. In shaping artistic form, students learn they have personal agency and self determination; that they are not just products of consumerism, but have a unique point of view that needs to be expressed. Although each generation sees things differently, everyone has a part to play in the ongoing quest for greater aesthetic understanding and enlightened personal and cultural transformation.

Philosophical reflection and empathetic understanding of the often complex meaning inherent in artistic form seems to be the place where ethics and aesthetics meet. Kant was correct when he proposed that the human mind creates reality and not the other way around. It is true that aesthetic perception and understanding reside not so much in the world, but in the eye of the beholder. Form in the painting in figure 61 entitled Art and Philosophy demonstrates this concept. However, whereas the meaning behind other paintings could be objectively discerned because I have had time to contemplate its form, this image is still fresh in my mind, making it difficult to see
objectively. Although its form is still becoming clear, it is obvious to me that this image contains many levels of personal as well as a more general cultural meaning.

As stated earlier, the title provides a clue to an accurate interpretation because this painting depicts the possibility of reconciliation between two opposing disciplines of study that often vie for my attention. Although making art and studying philosophy do
not preclude each other, often one will take precedence over the other. However, when these two figures began to emerge, they seemed to indicate that a shift had taken place, and somehow, the struggle between art and philosophy has to some extent been resolved. Perhaps the harmony between these two forms also shows that the unity of human experience requires a balance between the feminine and masculine energies. But in the end, aesthetic understanding will require viewers to use their own imagination, in order to fully comprehend what this image may articulate.

Practicing artistic creativity and self expression in the classroom facilitate aesthetic understanding, and for this reason alone, studying the arts should be a priority in today’s curriculum, although the pleasure of aesthetic engagement is a worthwhile experience in itself. I believe that art-making and aesthetic appreciation of form presents a valuable opportunity for the mind to grasp an expanded personal and cultural ideal. As mentioned earlier in chapter one, the shaping of artistic form and practicing aesthetic appreciation in the classroom has tremendous pedagogical value for students’ personal and cultural development because it makes implicitness, explicit. Making the implicit visible often provides greater human insight and empathetic understanding. Therefore, in conclusion, I would propose that developing a greater sense of aesthetic appreciation and understanding of form is ample reason to include art education in the contemporary curriculum.
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