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Painting as A Form of Meditation;

**An Observation of Influences of Mindfulness Meditation Through The Process Of
Painting**

Master's Thesis

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Abstract

The paper is written about Mindfulness meditation along with painting practice and the relation between the two different genres. Is it possible to gain a certain state with the help of mindfulness painting where I can get unpredictable results through my paintings? What could be the significant changes that I can observe through mindful painting? The paper tries to find the answers and examining them methodically. The paper offers a brief idea about the beginning of mindfulness in Psychology and art along with the artist who was involved actively in meditative art practice. How the Buddhist concept of mindfulness became a modern meditation form and why the necessity formed for mindfulness at that time. By observing my art practice, I was quite moved by my art-making process and the ideas behind the process. The more I tried to investigate my practice more I got new findings of my premeditated art practice. Most of the artworks I created in my whole career were usually pre intended. As a result, I was interested to introduce myself to a new way of practice where the result is undetermined. This paper also gets into the very personal involvement of mindfulness in my daily life. The pandemic created a very crucial situation where we have to create a relationship with space where we live and share our presence. More we live in the same space we feel monotonousness and lack of excitements. I decided to change the view upon the space and noticing the simple daily objects around me. Mindfulness can be practiced by noticing any object in the present moment in a specific way. It can be easier to practice mindfulness and deal with our mental state by creating interest in the simple living space where we create memories. Bringing mindfulness in my daily life further it became comfortable to interpret mindfulness with my art practice. In this paper, two different practices were defined wherein one segment I described the process of mindful painting and another one was my regular practice. How the mindfulness painting practice allowed me to experience the art practice in a non-judgmental way. By noticing the simple objects and further creating the artwork is not only produced a new piece of painting but also emerged to a great bonding between the object and the creative process. on the other hand, my regular practice which was predetermined was focusing the simplicity of the regular apartment space and observing the existential matter of the everyday stuff. Two different kinds of art practices and paintings were later observed to discover the changes. The mindful painting practice had some requirements and arrangements to start the practice. I mentioned which method I had chosen to practice mindful painting and how I further proceed with it. In any mindful practice, it is important to focus on the present moment and apply simple awareness. I tried

to observe the experience of the mindful art-making process. I tried to observe my regular practice on the other section and how I usually start thinking of artwork. The preliminary time of an artwork is very important for me because I always try to make a sketch already in my mind of the artwork. I also described how ordinary objects around me got attention from me and how I noticed those objects. The findings of two different practices were described and discussed in this paper. How flow state worked in both practices and how the compulsion grew were described briefly. In the mindful painting practice session, the flow state was intense and continuous wherein my regular practice flow state started and ended frequently. There were two different time limits for the two kinds of paintings. The motifs and color treatment, subject appearance were discussed in the chapter of findings. The result of mindful painting is spontaneous and my mind and body worked together as a pair to create the impact of mindfulness on the painting. I was more organized with color treatments and composition in my regular practice, but mindful painting practice depends on the mind and how it leads us to create shapes and lines. Lastly, I shortly discussed the research gaps and also the future possibilities to work with mindful painting.

Abstract

See uurimus on kirjutatud teadveloleku meditatsiooni seostamisest minu maalipraktikaga ja kahe erineva, minu tavapärase ja meeleteadliku, lähenemise suhtest. Mind huvitas, kas meeleteadliku maalimise (*mindfulness painting*) abil on võimalik saavutada seisund, milles saavutan enda jaoks ettearvamatuid tulemusi? Millised võiksid olla olulisemad muudatused, mida selle lähenemise kasutamisel märkan? Uurimus püüab leida vastuseid nendele küsimustele ja uurib neid metoodiliselt. Uurimistöös antakse lühike ülevaade, kuidas teadveloleku praktikate kasutamine jõudis psühholoogiasse ja kunstnikuteni, kes hakkasid aktiivselt rakendama oma loomingus meditatiivset kunstipraktikat. Mind huvitas ka, kuidas budistlikust meditatsioonist kujunes välja meie kaasaegne versioon sellest, teadveloleku praktikate kasutamine ja kuidas tekkis arusaamine teadveloleku vajaduse järele. Uurides ja analüüsid hoolikamalt oma loometee arengut, tegin selle põhjal mitmeid tähelepanekuid ja järeldusi. Enamik mu varasema kunstnikupraktika jooksul loodud kunsteostest valmisid tavaliselt pikemalt läbimõeldud planeerimise ja kavandamise tulemusel. Seetõttu oli huvitav proovida sellest erinevat praktikat, kus oodatav tulemus ei olnud nii kindlalt ette määratud.

See uurimus räägib ka isiklikuma loo teadveloleku kaasamisest minu igapäevaellu. Pandeemia tekitas mu elus keerulise olukorra, kus pidin pidevalt viibima samas ruumis, samade esemete keskel ning see hakkas oma ettearvatavuse ja monotoonsusega rõhuvalt mõjuma. Seetõttu otsustasin muuta oma vaatenurka selle ruumi suhtes ja hakata teadlikult keskenduma mind ümbritsevate tavapärase, igapäevaste esemete märkamisele. Teadvelolekut saab muuhulgas harjutada märgates praegust hetke tavapärasest erineval viisil. Ma märkasin, et teadveloleku meditatsiooni harjutamine ja oma vaimse seisundiga tegelemine võib olla lihtsam, kui kaasata huvi ruumi vastu, kus igapäevaselt elan ja millega on seotud minus tekkivad mälestused. Tuues teadveloleku oma igapäevaellu, muutus selle kasutamine ka oma kunstipraktikas kergemaks.

Selles töös tutvustan oma kogemusi seoses kahe erineva lähenemisega maalimisele ning selle tulemusel valminud teoseid. Ühes lõigus kirjeldan meeletheadliku maalimise protsessi ja teises oma varasemat tavapärast praktikat. Ma selgitan, kuidas meeletheadliku maalitehnika kasutamine võimaldas mul kogeda kunsti loomist hinnanguid andmata. Igapäevaste esemete märkamine ja kunstiteose loomine sellisel viisil ei sünnita mitte ainult uut maali, vaid ka eseme ja loomeprotsessi vahelist sidet. Minu igapäevane praktika sai mõjutatud pidevalt samas korteris viibimise kogemusest ning lihtsate, igapäevaste esemete teadvustamisest. Meeletheadliku maalimise praktikaga alustamiseks pidin tutvuma sellega seotud juhistega ja tegema vastavaid ettevalmistusi. Ma selgitan oma töös, millisel viisil valisin välja oma meetodi teadveloleku praktiseerimiseks ja kuidas ma selle kasutamist kogesin ning selle juures arenesin. Iga teadveloleku praktika aluseks on katsed keskenduda käesolevale hetkele ja arendada teadlikkust igapäevases elus. Ma proovisin jälgida, milline on minu kogemus meeletheadliku kunstiga tegelemise protsessis ja võrrelda seda oma tavapärase praktikaga, analüüsides, kuidas ma tavaliselt kunstiteoste loomisele lähenen. Kunstiteose loomise eelne, kavandamise periood on minu jaoks väga oluline. Ma püüan alati oma peas luua visandi valmis teosest. Ma jälgisin selles protsessis, kuidas igapäevased esemed mu ümber tõmbavad mu tähelepanu. Selles dokumendis kirjeldan ja analüüsin kahe erineva lähenemise tulemusi. Lühidalt kirjeldan, kuidas vooseisund(*flow state*) mõlemas praktikas tekkis ja kuidas keskendumine selle juures kasvas. Meeletheadliku maalimise ajal oli vooseisund intensiivne ja pidev, kuid mu tavapärast praktikat kasutades katkes vooseisund pidevalt. Mõlemates katsetes kasutatud motiive, värvikäsitlust ja objektide kujutusviisi on käsitletud järeltule peatükis. Meeletheadliku maalimise tulemusel ilmneb spontaansus ning vaba lähenemine. Minu vaim ja keha töötasid paarina koos, et teadvelolek jõuaks pildile. Oma tavapärase praktikat kasutades olin rohkem keskendunud värvidele ja kompositsioonile, kuid meeletheadlik maalipraktika sõltub mõistusest ja sellest, kuidas see meid kujundite ja joonte

loomiseks suunab. Uurimistöö lõpus räägin lühidalt oma uurimistöö võimalikest puudujääkidest ja tutvustan oma tuleviku mõtteid ja ideid seoses võimalustega kasutada oma kunstniku praktikas meeleteadliku maalimist ja teadvelolekut.

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Introduction

I have been developing my artist career for at least eight years and I have been examining my art practice very attentively. I have been trying to find out a relationship between artist and art practice which is not only focusing on the outcomes of the visible painting but also the experience of the process. As my art practice is mostly painting-based so the time that I think about the painting before I even start the work physically is very intense and, there is often an image that is present in my imagination. In some cases, those pre-made images were almost the same as the final results of paintings. My interest is to challenge myself with the process of painting where I am introducing myself to create artworks without any predetermination, imagination and, visualization. The most intriguing part for me as a painter is the preliminary period of any artwork. Our psychological world always gives us ideas about new images and we often pick our subjects for artwork from our observations, thoughts, or problems. This generous meaning of art is observable through the art-making process and in psychology could be intuitively in an artist's personality (Kamali, 2012). The perception of an artist's personality or influences of surroundings might not be always visible through the artwork. My interests started forming when I realized that I often visualized the topics in my psyche and almost the same thing is gradually coming as my artwork. The art-making process has different sections where the visualization and premeditated plans undoubtedly play the most important roles. As an art practitioner, I decided to throw myself into the place of my psychological world where I have never traveled before. This process was only possible for me with mindfulness meditation practice. Mindfulness practice often allows us to see differently and think broadly. I aim to infuse the presence of mindfulness practice along with painting and observing the whole process. To achieve my aim, I have two specific research questions. What could be the significant changes that could appear in my painting process through the involvement of meditation? Does mindfulness work effectively in the form of painting? By practicing mindfulness meditation we sometimes notice the sounds around us that we never heard or any unprioritized elements that have been always important but we never noticed. Mindfulness opens the doors of one's psyche which is often unseen. Mindfulness is an easy and simple way that involves outlining innovative distinctions, that is, observing new things. By noticing more, we develop our awareness to see how things change depending on the context and angle from which they are viewed (Langer, 2006). I have divided my three months of research period into two different sections. One of the sections is where I practiced mindfulness through painting and in

another section, I did my regular practice without intended mindfulness meditation. When I have finished two sections of practice, I have observed the significant changes in paintings with mindfulness and without intentional mindfulness. Usually, when I start an artwork I sometimes sketch possible compositions of the image that is already in my mind and looking forward to seeing the results in a form of an artwork. In my mindful painting practice, I allowed myself to look into the process I tried to discover the relationship between the objects and space. How everyday objects could be a subject for art, and how does our psyche function and respond by watching an object? How can I fulfill my needs and obsessions by spending time with a specific place and atmosphere? The most important fact is the artwork that is made with the collaboration with mindfulness could be a transitional object. This object can turn into new forms and shapes with the guidance of my mind. Another important aspect is the present new research practice of mindfulness painting didn't aim for a certain result or end product. Every time I have gone through the process of mindfulness there was a result but I have never got the image in my mind beforehand. In my experience, the main achievement of incorporating mindfulness is that I can work without thinking about judgments and expected results.

So these are the basic differences between two different parts of my practice that I have experimented with and observed and recorded as part of my research for this thesis.

1.0 Theoretical overview

Mindfulness meditation is a very popular term of meditation. The present form of mindfulness is not new at all but the acceptance and application of mindfulness practice in western society started in the late 1940s. The purpose of healing through mindfulness meditation which was used massively now expanded as a daily practice and became a part of our life.

1.1 What is Mindfulness?

When we say "Mindfulness Meditation" our mind immediately associates this with keywords such as Buddhism, Monks, Tibet, yoga, mantra, etc. Different types of meditation practices had come from Buddhism to western society already after the second world war. Nowadays, we can practice any kind of meditation which is adopted and modified for us. Currently, mindfulness practice guidance even can be found on our mobile phones in form of apps. Mindfulness meditation is often called Satipatthana meditation. Sayadaw U Panditabhivamsa once said in his book, *The Meaning of Satipatthana* that, 'Sati' is to remember but morally it means attentiveness to the present, not the past or the future (Panditabhivamsa, 2000). He also added that the word Patthana means, 'close, firm establishment'. Satipatthana is mindfulness of any noted objects by rushing to, entering into, and spreading over it so that our minds stay close to it (Panditabhivamsa, 2000). Mindfulness is a wide-ranging concept that is difficult to explain and define. Henepola Gunaratana, a Buddhist monk and the writer of *Mindfulness in Plain English*, explains this, saying that "mindfulness is extremely difficult to define in words—not because it is complex, but because it is too simple and open (Gunaratana, 2011)." A simple way to understand Mindfulness is being present, being non-judgemental and being true to ourselves, and most importantly allowing our consciousness to listen, smell and experience our surroundings.

1.2 Mindfulness in Psychology and Art

The philosophical birth of Mindfulness practice happened a few decades ago, arguably after world war II (Dryden, 2006). It was said in the research named *Handbook of Mindfulness* that, The number of books published on the topic of Zen Buddhism and mindfulness had a significant rise from 1950 to 1960 (Brown et al, 2015). Afterward, the common American population became increasingly and positively interested in Buddhism and the term "mindfulness" was frequently used for the first time outside of Buddhist culture. In the

1990s, mindfulness had become a common topic of psychology research (J. David Creswell, 2015). Today, we already can see several kinds of mindfulness-based therapies are used in psychology. For example, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), mindfulness cognitive therapy (MBCT), mindful awareness practices (MAP), and mindfulness-based art therapy (Pearlman, 2012). Ellen Pearlman, a writer, faculty member at Parsons School for Design, and a Buddhist practitioner, describes this in her book *Nothing and Everything—The Influence of Buddhism on the American Avant-Garde: 1942-1962*. Pearlman further explains that the destruction witnessed during World War II left many poets, writers, and artists exhausted and looking for a new way—many of whom turned to Eastern religions. Pearlman writes that "Zen Buddhism's emphasis on "pacifism, nontheism, antimaterialism, and techniques of meditation and contemplation attracted many forward-thinking individuals (Pearlman, 2012)". Pearlman also said that The Dadaists, an avant-garde art movement from 1916 to 1924, and the Surrealism movement that followed it, are two such movements that were particularly involved with Zen philosophy (Pearlman, 2012). Artists individually became more interested and started traveling to Zen monasteries and spreading their knowledge as well. Artist Morris Graves, Mark Tobey, AD Reinhardt were the artists who have involved the Zen Buddhism with their art practice. In the 16th century when paintings often contained religious and allegorical symbolism relating to the objects depicted, we see how these objects lose their domestic purpose to become sculptural objects that may invite meditation and contemplation, 'we slow down and focus when looking at them' (Smith, 2014)". The objects such as books, glasses, fruits, flowers and, dead animals were used for painting still lifes by that time. By going through changes and transformations the objects that were used for paintings were changed. The painters who choose everyday objects to paint, as symbolized by the humble, ordinary and available object, can become a way of seeing beyond ourselves and giving ourselves up to the contemplation of the wealth of material reality (Robins, 2006). "Much later in the 20th century, Morandi(1890-1964) solved the problem of ambiguity in meaning, i.e. naive and simple objects or motifs in art, reaching a combination that gives the objects new meaning and it is possible to give new meaning to most works of art (Smith, 2014)". Contemporary printmaker Simon Cooper uses ordinary objects as a form of philosophical inquiry: "Cooper uses drawing not just as meditation, but as mediation, as an active thinking process and a journey of discovery. The etchings and paintings are firmly grounded in observation which, by way of the time required in production, sees these images become invested with the new meanings that start to seep through when one is looking at something (Delaruelle, 2003)".

Roseline de Thelin, a contemporary artist, and art therapist who writes articles about mindfulness described the changes and benefits of mindfulness through art practice. She wrote, “When the brain is programmed to achieve a fixed result, the chances that something new will be discovered are dramatically reduced. Just look at a child painting without the conditioning of what is right or wrong and you will for sure get inspired and motivated. The results and efficiency are demanding so much of us in society, we need exploratory and experimental playtime to open ourselves to unexpected possibilities and grow out of the box (Thelin, 2019). Contemporary artist Nadja Gabriel Plein also practices mindfulness drawings and teaches mindfulness as a professional. She said that Drawing as meditation, then, is an action that begins with ‘simple observation’ and moves beyond that to something that engages with the world in a very deep sense. Deep looking on one hand and active, accountable participation on the other (Plein, Nadja Gabriela, 2020).

2.0 Mindfulness in Everyday Life

It was a sunny day in summer 2018 and I was showing some of the old photographs of my paintings to a very close friend. My friend asked me what was the motivation that worked behind those paintings? She wanted to know more precisely about the choice of topics and style of painting that I had chosen. While answering her, one question raised straightway in my mind, how much effort did I put in to have a respected grade and how much effort did I put into my sense of satisfaction. How honest was I with my work? Those weren't truly my honest expressions that came out as artworks. The expressions might be true but not the way I painted was truly was my preferred way of painting. I started thinking to become truthful and honest in my art practice. I started confronting the truth about my ability and embracing it proudly. I took my feeling into an account to make art. Such as the feeling of loneliness or the feeling of being driven by something that I didn't like or the feeling of being slow. That was how I got closer to Mindfulness meditation. I started mindfulness meditation a few months ago when I had been going through some sort of depression. By that time I already learned to be honest with myself. What I needed to do was just to have a pause from the hectic schedule and allow myself to search the core of the psychological world which was unseen. I was just two steps away. We all know that we have been judged a lot by the people around us. We all faced judgments on each decision we made in our life. I was looking for an open-air space not to be judged by anyone. I started introducing mindfulness in my daily life. I started focusing on every single thing around me which I never did before. I focused on being nonjudgmental while choosing the subjects for paintings. I allowed my senses to find the material around me those I have always seen but never gave any attention.

2.1 Self-isolation

Due to the Pandemic all over the world, I have been isolated in a 26m apartment for few months. As a social human being, I get used to the words quarantine, home office, zoom meetings, and so on. When every single person was tired of the locked-down and isolation, I somehow took this opportunity as a challenge. The challenge of accepting the space the way it is and making it interesting. A regular apartment with a TV, refrigerator, and Microwave, home plants became a huge space of discovery for me. I took each day to focus on each object. The daily task I do such as cleaning and cooking was way harder

for me when I had other workloads of school. I started practicing mindfulness with every work I do. One of the greatest use of mindfulness is one can practice the work which needs attentiveness. As a result, my chores became easier for me. Buddhist mindfulness practitioner and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says that "We just don't wash dishes to have clean dishes, we also enjoy the process of washing and we live each moment of washing them". After bringing mindfulness to everyday chores, fulfilling the responsibilities has become easier. As an introverted person, I prefer to be at home and try to discover something new and interesting within this small space. When everyone goes outside to enjoy the sun, I prefer to stay home and take pictures of the shadow on the curtains. I feel more alive than ever.

2.2 Practicing to Stop and Noticing the Objects

As a practitioner, the first step to mindfulness was to stop. With tons of work every day, it is hard to stop and just do nothing. I started practicing to pause once a day because my mind is always busy with workloads so I give my mind a ten minutes break to be free and go wherever it wants to go. Before embarking on a painting, consciously bringing my mind to rest to consider how to approach my painting. Once I had a problem in my workplace and my colleague said something offensive to me. So I needed to decide, do I need to reply and argue with the person or I can just skip this confrontation? I was extremely angry, disappointed and sad but I just took a minute and I stopped for a while. I just didn't say anything to anyone. I stopped and started noticing my breathing. I told myself that I didn't do anything wrong or bad so why do others' opinions affect me? I gave myself a few questions. What causes the anger? Somebody misbehaved with me. Did I do anything wrong or upsetting? No, then why her actions are hurting me so hard? I shouldn't feel the way I am feeling right now because I can't control her actions. I stopped and calmed myself down. The rest of the day went quite well. My co-worker didn't understand that she was rude but that didn't affect me either. I try it at home as well every day. The thing I realized after stopping that when I pause from working, close my eyes slowly and I notice my breath, I am aware of the moment I am living. It doesn't have to be for a long time at any one stretch. Using the breath to bring us back to the present moment takes no time at all, only a shift in attention. But great adventures await you if you give yourself a little time to string moments of awareness together, breath by breath, moment to moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2001). I notice the light in the room and I notice the dark. I notice

from which tap the water is dripping. I can smell the food I have cooked or the odor from the trash can. All of my senses start rising slowly. This daily pause from the rest of the world allows me sometimes to revisit my hometown, even the apartment that I shared with my mom. I can walk along the road I walked every day in my childhood. I can smell the soil sometimes. Jon Kabat Zinn wrote in his book called, *Meditation for Everyday life* that, Maybe we don't have to make one more phone call right now, even if we think we do. Maybe we don't need to read something now or run for one more duty. By taking a few minutes to "die on purpose" to the rush of time while we are still living, we free ourselves to have time for the present. By "dying" now in this way, we become more alive now. This is what stopping can do (Kabat-Zinn, 2001). After practicing mindfulness every day, the first development I noticed was the ability to notice every small thing around me. It takes patience and encouragement to notice anything unnoticed. One of the very first days of practicing mindfulness I was sitting on the floor and just my side there was my bed. I saw my messy blanket over the bed. I decided to watch it and observe it a bit. I found the shapes and patterns coming and going into the folds and some of the lines of the design were straight and some were shaky. The blanket was on the bed and there was something underneath the blanket and it seemed to me like a figure. I knew there was nothing or nobody was hiding under the blanket. The blanket even appeared to me as a reshaped stone-like thing. The other day I was trying to notice the objects around me again. My eyes stuck on the switchboards that I have in my apartment. The switchboards are those objects that exist but we never really pay attention. We pay attention probably when it stops working or some short circuit occurs. So eventually I saw there were five switchboards in my apartment and the closest socket which I looked at has three holes in it. I noticed that the holes are always busy so that the board is never empty. It is constantly working but I never noticed. The practice of noticing things doesn't only help to get closer to the object but also makes me more aware of the existence of the objects that I have in my surroundings. Eventually, I stepped into my bathroom and looked at the curtain near the shower. I have never paid attention to it ever like other objects. It's a beautiful blue synthetic curtain with evenly folds in it. The curtain of the shower has nothing special in it. When I take shower and it just protects the water from spilling. I explored a bit more and I found the curtain not only the protection or barrier from the other side of the bathroom. It's also been a protector of my imaginary world behind the curtains and under the shower. The time I spend behind the curtain is the most intimate moment with myself. This blue curtain knows all my secret ideas and keeps them within the boundary. The noticing practice makes me more productive to shape an idea and develop new artworks.

The moment I realized the existential matter of the curtain it became more prioritizing for me.

3.0 Practice with mindfulness (did it work?)

Previously I mentioned how I practiced mindfulness in my daily life with ordinary works and objects. As an artist further it was easy for me to sit down and get myself ready for the next step which is mindfulness practice with painting. There is a very popular term of mindful creative practice is called beginner's mind. The beginner's mind should have a lot of curiosity and joy in creating something new like a child even if I don't know what would I create today. There are numerous ways I found where I can collaborate on mindfulness and painting. All of the techniques are unique and some of those need to practice within special guidance. I selected the way I can find myself comfortable and tried to work with that. The process I used to paint mindful paintings was inspired by the artist Nadja Gabriel Plein. By this process, there are some easy steps to follow. I usually do it when I am relaxed a bit and there are no other noises. In the preparation for this exercise, I keep all the art supplies and other elements close to me so I could grab them easily. I am writing below the steps about looking at the object/objects for mindfulness.

a) The first thing I make sure that I am sitting in a comfortable place and there are no complications with the seat. Usually, I sit down on the floor, facing the object or near the object. Usually, I set the timer for 5 minutes sometimes. I sit upright but not rigid and I close my eyes gently. Bring my awareness to the gravity of my body and all those places where your body touches the chair or the floor. Then, gently, I bring my awareness to my breath. When I understand the breath and how the inhale and exhale works, my body gets already the signal of calmness. I try to identify Where do I feel the breath most? Try to feel the breath inside my body. Keeping my awareness of my breath in this place and observing it closely. I place a soft focus on a specific object that I select beforehand. If my mind roams around somewhere, I bring it back to the breath and just try to focus on the object. When the timer rings, bring my attention briefly back to the gravity of the body and then open my eyes. Sometimes I don't use the timer because I like to be in the state for a longer time.

b) Without taking a break, I start to paint with or without putting the selected object in my mind. I don't think about the painting or plan it, just start wherever my eyes first land on the paper or the chosen surface and I start from that place, aiming to observe closely and carefully as I did with the breath. I try not to make something but I just let my mind and hand run together like a pair. Before starting each painting I make sure that I have everything around and I put all the colors on the palate.



fig 1, 42x59.4cm, Acrylic on Paper

3.1 Flow state and the body of the chair

Before going through the process of mindful painting, I want to share a story about the chair that I have in my apartment. The apartment I live in is quite old and so are the items of furniture. The chair seems very old to me. every time someone sits on it, instantly, it makes noises. Afterward, when someone leaves the chair it makes sounds again. It appears to me this body of the chair can not take any more weight on it. When someone old gets into some troubles, they make sounds for rescue and help. I also feel the chair wants some help from us when somebody is sitting on it because it is so old and almost broken. A few days ago, I was telling my roommate that the chair maybe has the spirit of an old woman who has weak knees, back pain, and a very intolerant temper so it can not take any weight on it and reacts immediately. A few weeks ago, I attempted to make a mindful painting focusing on that old chair in my apartment. So I started focusing and breathing. The chair was in front of me so

I could watch it closely. I was gently touching the chair with my eyes and trying to feel the body of the chair by using my senses. Then after watching and observing the chair I started painting. The first thing I remember I tried to paint the body of the chair which is a quite common subject of painting. The exceptional matter was the feeling of the process I had at that time. I was consumed by the action of my mind and my hand. I just let both work and not stop for a while. If I stopped by that time there could be a chance that my mind would have thought the next step. So I didn't let them stop and I continued by the flow. The flow state is common for every artist. In some points of painting or drawing, there is a moment or several moments come when time seems not running at all. Flow state only allows the artist the art-making process at a time. My own experience with flow state was tremendous and I felt my anxieties are reduced drastically. I saw the bonding of my flow of breathing and my flow of lines and strokes. On one occasion I could only observe the actions that hand is taking to make lines or building a structure. While in that state, suddenly my roommate came and sat on the chair. I saw him sitting on the chair but I didn't notice him walking by my side and sitting in front of me. At that moment, I felt the heaviness suddenly. It might seem very dramatic by feeling the chair with my senses I felt the heaviness that was on the chair. I had a feeling that the chair has hands which are not visible. Then I looked at the chair again and I started drawing two hands of the chair. The thought of the chair having two hands and drawing it on the paper, these two occurrences happened in a few seconds. At some point, the bodies of my roommate and the chair became the same object for me. I turned my focus on the head of my roommate and I drew the head on top of the body of the chair so it seemed to me at last that the body of the chair has a figure of the mixture of a human body and a metal body. I was still in the flow noticing my breath and the action of my hand. I took pretty solid color to fill up the background and at some points, I felt my mindfulness has been reduced and I almost started taking decisions to change or modify the painting. Realizing that, I stopped after a few moments. The painting appeared to me as a figure of a tired and exhausted entity. Later that day, a question came to me that did this painting have any influence on the story that I have made previously in my mind? There is no clear explanation for it.

3.1.1 Compulsion and Expectation

In any kind of art practice, repetition occurs which is a very common compulsive activity. The notion of compulsion in mindful painting indicates a commitment to the daily practice

of making – a kind of everyday ritual rather than the ‘one off’ or performative style of (for example) abstract expressionist artists such as Pollock and De Kooning (Robins, 2006). The idea of compulsion directs to the need for art-making. My experience of mindful painting did not reach the level of addiction but when I chose a day to practice and the end of the day I found that I made quite many paintings. It appeared to me that it depends on the mindset of how I decide to spend the day. If it is the day I am focusing on a mindful painting then it is addictive. If I decide to focus on a subject and make one painting, it never happens. I have no control over the flow of paint so it just goes on and on. I realized that my mind gets obsessed sometimes to think more and more and let the hand do the rest. The mindful painting practice creates a spiritual bonding with the object we look at and our creation. The bonding might be very abstract to describe but it is more about experiencing the moment. If I think about the expectation from mindful painting then it is not mindful practice at all. The very basic mantra of being in a mindful art practice that one can not expect anything. If there is any expectation then it is premeditated which I practiced also. There is no expectation and there are no judgments on the process. If someplace of a painting needs more touch I just let it go. If my mind leads me to make a dot, I let myself do it. I let my mind take all the decisions by the need of the moment. It is yet too complicated to be non-judgmental for an artist because after a while everyone judges their artwork. It is often said by the practitioners to create mindful paintings just for relaxing and observing the moment. It’s not even obligatory to show other people if someone doesn’t want to. In my opinion, it is brave and challenging to show the painting to others and get their opinion because it doesn’t make any difference. It is important to have a satisfying moment with the mindful art-making process. I have expectations with my regular practice because I know what I am looking for but with mindful painting, I go further without framing and thinking about anything which is the beauty of the process. The idea of expectation doesn’t work with the mindful art-making process that I practice.

3.2 Do I plan it?

Every creative work requires mindfulness like drawing, sketching, printmaking, photography. We experience mindfulness just unknowingly with every activity we participate in every day. My regular practice as a painter also involves mindfulness but the basic difference with the art practice that I explained above was intentional mindfulness. I participated in mindfulness and then I collaborated with my body in the process of painting.

In my regular practice, I do not start with any meditation of watching an object before I start any painting. For my regular practice session, I have chosen very simple objects. I explained before that I have been noticing my surroundings very carefully for the last few months. That led me to some ideas which are not sophisticated but yet very simple. My intention was also to bring the simple object to the painting and highlight it differently.



Fig 2, 70x90cm, Acrylic on Canvas

There is no special activity in my regular practice. I choose an object and I sketched that before I started the painting. I choose my bed as a subject because it has a great role to fulfil my apartment. In one of the previous sections where I mentioned noticing practice there, I wrote about the blanket and a little story about how this messy blanket appeared to me as something unusual. That's why I choose the blanket to paint. In the sketch, there was a feeling of a presence but I was not sure, which I wanted to bring into the painting too. I

imagined a natural space just beside the bed which was exciting for me to observe. I aimed to connect nature and my personal space by the bond of quietness and serenity. The impact of the subject might not be too strong but still says something spiritual. How flow state works here in my regular practice? Flow state here works at a different level. My apartment and the object of my choice create a strong bond by that time of flow. The door where my apartment ends the public space starts is the boundary of my own safest place of work and the outside world. Here, inside the studio apartment, the objects and my practice start to interact with each other and this period offers me to look at them and get absorbed. As I work mostly with acrylic it doesn't need perhaps the same attention as the heavily detailed work but yet there is a lot to feel and experience through the art-making process. Looking very closely at the objects sometimes leads me to do very realistic work which is not required so there I break the concentration of being obsessed with super details. I just feel happy with the not too sketchy and not too detailed work. I have seen that the concentration of art-making processes was sometimes very strong that my mind shows me the way I can achieve the result I am expecting. In that case, time goes by with the flow of work. Nothing stops or creates boundaries and I simply get to the destination that I want to reach. There are always some challenges too. In the painting above I planned to paint the blanket and I made the sketch too but when I started drawing on the canvas, the bed along with the blanket offered me a great composition. Not only composition but also a possibility to create a peaceful space by the painting, where I can feel the presence of someone who just slept and woke up then turned towards the forest and walked away. He/She might come sooner. I like the possibilities that might arise while someone will see the painting and relate to them. In my regular practice, the flow state starts and ends frequently. Suppose I wanted to paint the bed without any bed sheet but then I decided to add a bedsheet. So here flow state ends because I have so many things to consider and I have to make quite many decisions too. Then comes the terms of compulsion in my practice. Well, the compulsion to get involved in the work is different every time. The time when I created the painting I mentioned (fig.2) was intense. I spent two days finishing it because the whole painting and the elements on it were forcing me to finish it quickly. It was addictive in a sense. I felt like an invisible force was working behind it. I guess it is the realization of creating something for my satisfaction. The satisfaction of getting something new also makes me happy. When the painting is nearly finished, I usually start thinking about the importance and the impact of the painting in my artist career. As a competitive person, it is very important to me to judge my creation before it is going to be judged by other people including professionals.

4.0 Findings

In this section, I would need a help of a friend who is a writer and aesthete. His name is Simon and he pretty much knows about my art practice. We had a long discussion about my mindfulness practice and how mindfulness and art can create impacts on my paintings. Simon has seen all paintings I have made Until this day. I invited him into my space to have a closure look at the paintings. He had a look at all of the paintings and he has chosen two of the different categories (one meditative painting, another regular painting).

4.1 Findings(part 1)

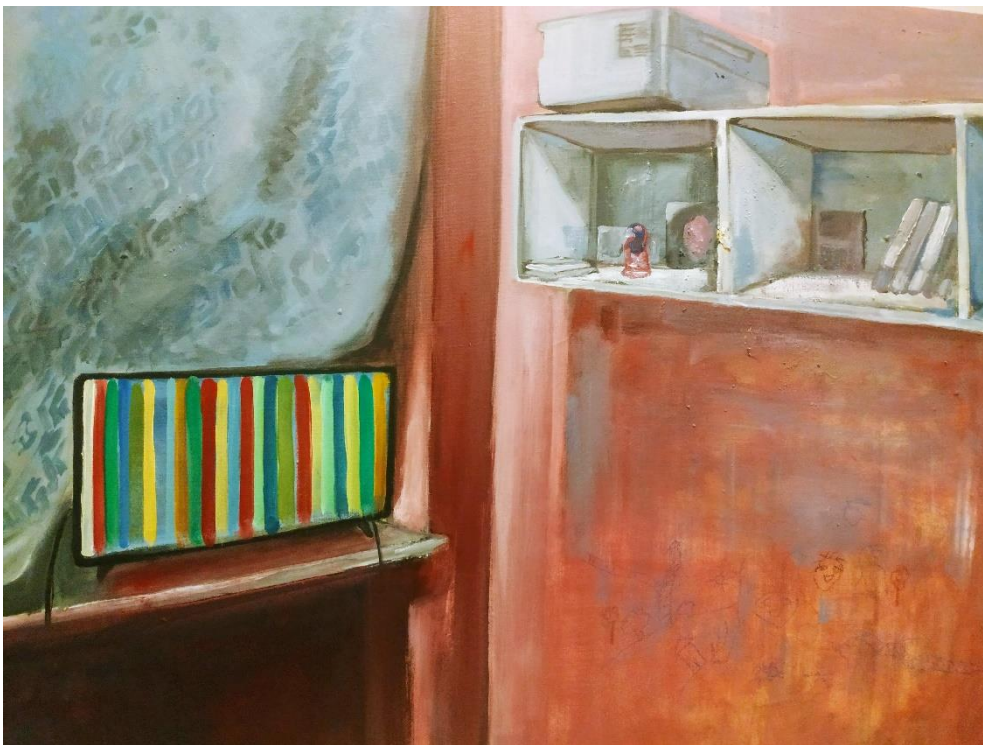


fig 3, 50x70cm, Acrylic on Masonite board

Simon picked this painting because he liked this painting most among other paintings. He liked the composition and especially the position of the tv. He likes the color of the wall and that creates the vintage atmosphere here. This painting gave him the essence of his grandparent's house. He figured out that in this painting someone seems trying to change the channel. On this point, I agree with him that it has a feeling of presence indeed. So I added with him that from my side, the tv is something we share our time with and, we surf into the world behind it. Simon started telling a story about tv that he has seen a few years back. Once he watched a movie where a girl was watching tv and suddenly tv turns off by itself.

The girl finds the remote and plays the tv again. After a while, the tv goes off again and the girl sees there is a shadow of an old man on the tv. I think the story helped us to make the further conversation a bit easier. I requested him to look more sincerely and comment on my paintings more critically. We came across a few interesting facts about this painting. The subject matter of this painting is quite uncommon compared to my previous practice. The painting symbolized one of the corners of my apartment and I intended to find the simplicity of the corner in my painting and merged it with imagination. He picked the fact that a simple corner of an apartment can be something special to be the subject of painting. Simon found out that the red wall in the painting has some child-like drawings on it which refer to the presence of a child or a few children. The shelves on the painting which are loaded with different kinds of stuff also refer to a family of two or more people sharing the apartment. Simon mentioned the warm lighting and calmness of the corner are visible in the painting. He tried to focus the color treatment and brushing on the painting. In a few areas such as curtains, shelves I tried to use a small brush to define lines and lights and shades. There was a visible effort of detailing on the painting, especially the child-like drawings which were done by crayons. There were also some spaces on the painting which were roughly treated. More application of different brushing techniques and strokes could create more contrast in the painting. Later he suggested that I could think and consider a bit of a different composition. He figured out that there could be something unusual in the picture that might make it more interesting. He was expecting more contrast in the same painting.

4.2 Findings (Part 2)

Here is the meditative painting that Simon choose for analysis. He has chosen this painting because he thinks that the previous painting and this painting both have the same color contrast. Which I don't know if it's true or not. I remember that day I was looking at a drapery for observing mindfulness and I wasn't feeling the mindfulness so I stopped. I started again so this time the closest object was my hand. I started observing my hand. Simon figured out the surface is not the same as the previous painting. I created the painting on paper because frequent movements are easy with paper. He found out that there is a roughness in the painting. Nothing is intended to be polished or to make it more realistic. I agreed and added that it is the way my mind worked that time. I remembered that I was constantly moving my hand and painting with another hand. I attempted to catch the movements not the detail of the hand. It felt that my hand is trying to play some invisible instruments. Those

movements of the hand became the form of lines and strokes in different colors. He wanted to see the brushes I have used on the painting.



fig 4, 42x59.4cm, Acrylic on Paper

I agreed and added that it is the way my mind worked that time. I remembered that I was constantly moving my hand and painting with another hand. I attempted to catch the movements not the detail of the hand. It felt that my hand is trying to play some invisible instruments. Those movements of the hand became the form of lines and strokes in different colors. He wanted to see the brushes I have used on the painting. I used only one brush for this painting because I didn't get any sign from my mind that I should use more brushes to get more different strokes so technically it was impossible to get into more details. Later Simon figured out that he also felt rising energy with the painting. The experience of making art and the experience of looking at the finished piece are always different. In meditative painting, it's more complicated because I don't have any intentions or goals so what I get on the last is always surprising. Simon asked me about the experience of using paper on the floor to create this painting. I remember that for a few moments I wanted to push the brush to feel the hardness of the floor through the paper. The stronger surface makes the action of

the hands safer and stronger. With a canvas surface that is quite impossible to push harder because it might cause damage to the canvas. Those strong strokes created some sort of strength, I suppose. We got into a small summary of findings and changes in meditative practice.

If I want to draw a line here that is different from the previous painting (fig.3) that I used different brushes on the painting to get the details I looked for.

5.0 Comparison

My two different types of paintings were produced in different times and situations. They were created in the same space which is my apartment where I am living right now. Yet there is a lot of differences between these two types of the art-making process. The reason why I have to conduct this comparison because I am interested to know if mindfulness created an impact in my art practice if it has made some impact on what are those. The two different practices have different values which is not much comparable because in my regular practice I don't attempt to do many abstract works but in meditative painting, some figures of abstract forms are found. In my regular practice, I try to make realistic works indeed with a twist of an imaginary world. I wanted to find beauty in the presence of an object which is always neglected. The work is realistic with an unrealistic vibe in it. I focus on the subject matter in my everyday practice. In meditative practice sometimes subjects just get lost with other interpretations of experience and imagination. The object I focused on sometimes also disappeared or turned into a new form in my mind when I start painting. Wendy Ann Greenhalgh, a teacher, an artist, writer, describes in her book *Mindfulness & The Art of Drawing*: "when we are practicing the mindfulness of drawing, it is the movement of the pen across the page, the coordination of eye and hand, and the object we are drawing that becomes our mindful focus. (Greenhalgh, 2015)". In my mindful paintings, there were different forms and many rough brush strokes, and more confident lines and shapes. With meditative painting, I felt uncertain because I felt hesitant to show what I created. It is common for the artist because we care a lot about the judgments of the people. It is uncertain if later I get satisfaction with the painting. If I think about the purpose of having mindful time then I am pretty successful but not always with the outcomes. I created paintings with a beginner's mind and I forgot that I know how to draw as if I have never done it before (Greenhalgh, 2015). The outcome doesn't create any difference in my experience. Another significant difference that I found is I have no specific time to finish a painting but if I am practicing mindful painting then I had a certain period. The time still goes until I feel I am still non-judgmental, I am enjoying the moment and not forcing myself at all. My personal experience says that I cannot be a mindful painter for a couple of hours. It is possible with pauses. The meditative paintings I created were made in one action. There were no pauses or interruptions.

6.0 Confession

Before getting to the conclusion that is mindful painting practice worked for me or not there is something I want to share about myself. As an artist, I have been judging myself a lot. I have a lot of self-doubts, a lack of confidence, and self-worthlessness. I have been in doubt for several years that what I was doing, I was not sure. Self-discovery was very important for me. When I have self-doubts I usually listen to Allan Watts (1915-1973). I have heard once him saying that, "We spend our whole life doing the work we don't like. It's better to have a short life that is full of what we like doing rather than having a measurable life doing an unpleasant job". Those words made me quite inspired in my hard days of self-discoveries. I know that I will find the gate I am looking for. A few years ago, my practice was different. I always tried new things but not which I doubted to face a failure. I never had attempted to try to paint infusing new ways of paintings. I had a fear of failure, humiliation, and ignorance. Michael A Franklin once asked in an interview is self-worthless part of an artist or a human condition? Michael replied, "It's part of a lot of things. Some children are often told by their families that they are worthless. Day to day, months after months they are not even listened to by their parents. Self-worthlessness creates a form in your structure (Wollman, 2019)". I had no confidence to make art for myself which can appear bad. I didn't run any experiments. I only did what I thought I am good at. Being 'good' at a certain level didn't also last long. My technical ability didn't help me to create new ideas. There were huge ups and downs but I managed to survive. The only thing I learned is I have to take risks whatever I do. I had to step out of my bubble. The other thing I convinced myself that if I don't make bad paintings, probably I am not producing good paintings either. Mindful painting practice made me a bit more confident to walk through my psychological world. It was challenging to be non-judgmental and open-minded because I didn't work with any meditation in past. It is a practice to let the mind work in a way it wants to work without imposing any directions or guidance. It is hard to change our habits but people do change and they change when they try new things. I would say with my assumption that I have a lot to do with mindful painting because it heals from inside and gives an entire unreal journey of freedom. In the future, I would also love to find out how both kinds of practice work together as a pair. I might create a secret area of mindful practice that I am not going to share with anyone. When I started mindful painting, my intuitions told me to gradually break the limitations that I made in my mind a long ago.

Conclusion

During this specific research, I have aimed to observe my art practice and developed an interest in observing the surroundings how I make a relation to the place where I work. I have researched how the ordinary place of no interest made me enthusiastic. As a painter, I spent a huge amount of time looking at the progress of the painting and achieving the expected images through my artwork. This research created an opportunity to spend time with the ordinary objects which I choose to paint and recognized the importance of these. The part of the research was intended to observe the mindful painting in a certain way where I found that my imagination can lead me in a different direction depending on the emotion I am having at that specific moment. It has been very interesting for me to observe mindfulness through painting and discover something original in my art-making process. I faced some limitations when I started mindful painting such as time frame and my ability to concentrate in a certain way. Now I understand how mindfulness works for me and how important it is to step forward from the comfort zone of my regular painting practice and make a new safe zone with mindfulness painting practice.

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- 28/08/2019–Present Master of Contemporary Art Estonian Art Academy, Tallinn (Estonia)
- 17/09/2018–26/08/2019 Master in Estonian Studies Tallinn University, Tallinn (Estonia)
- 19/01/2014–16/04/2016 Master of Fine Arts, Fine Arts Institute, University Of Dhaka
- 07/04/2009–04/09/2013 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Fine Arts Institute, University of Dhaka

Exhibition

- 2020 - Endast Valjas (out of oneself), Ars Projecteerum,
- 2018 - Gush(a group exhibition of 13 Bangladeshi artists in Tokyo, Japan),
- 2015 - 93th anniversary, Dhaka university Exhibition
- 2015 -10th Dimensions, a group art exhibition, Zainul Art Gallery
- 2012 -Annual Art Exhibitions, University of Dhaka
- 2013 -Annual Art Exhibitions, University of Dhaka
- 2010 -Bangabandhu Art Exhibition

Work

2018- present Freelance Artist

2015-2018 Partner Artist, Tukitaki XYZ

2012–2016 Part-time Illustrator ACDI VOCA, USAID, Bonani (Bangladesh)

2009–2010 Drawing Teacher Oasis International English Medium School, Uttara (Bangladesh)

2009–2017 Freelance Book Cover Artist