

The Artist's Statement by
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for
PATHWAYS
A Buddhist Experience

The medium I use is *nihonga*, a thousand-year-old form of painting that I learned while living in Japan. (*Nihon* is 'Japanese' and *ga* is 'painting.')

Technically, *nihonga* can mean any Japanese painting style, but among artists it is generally understood to mean this form. Although *nihonga* is similar to tempera painting, in that both use dry pigments and a binding agent, *nihonga* has pigments that range from very fine powders to coarse granules. One color may have as many as fifteen granulated textures with hues that can vary from vibrant saturated ones to softer, whitish toned ones, with effects that range from opaque to translucent to transparent. Washes of vibrant, coarse pigments over subdued powdered ones create glowing final colors. Finer, softer hued pigments over coarser ones create interesting textures.

Fine and coarse grains are also often mixed together to create a stable picture surface. The glue has to be strong enough to fix both to the surface at the same time and also to be light enough not to obscure the life of the color. When I began to learn about the complexities of granulated pigments, I found that if I used an incorrect ratio of glue to water to paint a mix of coarse and fine pigments to the surface, the result could be flaking, dropping off, or cracking of the dried colors. This was tricky since the ratio of glue to water differed according to the coarseness of the grains. Enough experience of this kind gave me a practical sense as to what would work and what would not. The right ratio of glue to pigment mix, when dry, results in long-lasting colors that give a feeling of light intermingling in the colors of the picture. Luminous colors and translucent effects are a feature of this medium.

From the viewpoint of technique I would say that my way of painting *nihonga*, in spite of its Western influence, is traditional, because I learned it in a traditional manner, and even with the addition of personal methods I have generally continued to paint in a similar

way. I begin each painting by glueing wet, strong fiber paper to wood panels or, as in the Pathway paintings, hollow wood doors cut to size. When dry, I size the paper with alum crystals dissolved in organic glue and water. Traditionally the glue has been made from animal skins and bones, but today synthetic glue is also available, and there is some experimentation with powdered egg whites. I used the animal protein glue because I have experienced that its adherence is stronger than that of the synthetic kind. After dissolving pigments in the glue and adding water, I paint them on the mounted, prepared paper with brushes. The handling and care of the glue is also important to the longevity of the colors, as even slightly sour glue can result in discoloration, and loose or falling pigments. When fresh glue is used, the dried surface, like the dried egg surface of tempera, hardens enough that layer upon layer can be applied until a desired effect is realized. Since glue darkens with age, denser glue is used in the beginning and more dilute glue is used as the final surface is approached. A light touch with glue on the top layers ensures stable, long lasting colors.

Although minerals such as malachite or lapis lazuli are still ground for pigments, the prohibitive costs leads me to paint with the popular pigments made today from dyed pottery. Their colors are also beautiful and have a strong retention of hues. Once panels are prepared and sized, I paint individual surfaces, for the most part, with various mixtures of white, pearl, or soft mica-white pigment. This initial white color both prepares paintings to receive other colors and contributes to the final colors since translucency will be a large part of the overall effect. I also mix pearl and mica white into some of the later pigments to continue the effect of the glowing white underpainting. I follow the white underpainting with black paint to make large, spontaneous brushstroke and splatter designs that identify each theme and will remain partially visible in the completed picture.

Traditionally gold leaf has often been used to create backgrounds. Whether the subject was a scene such as a landscape or a few flowers, the leaf surrounded most of, or all of the subject, making it both separate from, and yet a part of, the ordinary reality of the picture. The use of gold leaf also flattened the area, in which subjects were frequently modeled in detail. This effect heightened the feeling of another dimension or of a wondrous perspective. With or without leaf, ordinary/extraordinary space was an important perspective in traditional nihonga, and although the techniques are evolving, the same

abstracted perspective of space still remains, whether a work is representational or otherwise. The word to describe this perspective of space is *ku* in Japanese. It has many meanings, among them, emptiness, or space that is pregnant with possibilities.

On top of the basic white color I use one or more under colors before laying down any gold leaf and often paint on top of the leaf to finish the image. Working with the light and dark effect that is dependent on the position of the viewer, I also use warm and cool leaf as colors, accents or backgrounds to both anchor the subjects to the picture and to set them apart, or to try to reveal the wonder of the subjects as well as to describe them. Highlighting areas with gold leaf emphasizes other areas of importance.

My installation *Pathways, a Buddhist experience*, at California State University, Northridge, in December, 2003, to complete a Master's program, was an attempt to portray a journey of self-discovery and unfolding of Being. Ego is often described as 'small mind' in Buddhism, while 'big mind' is everything else, including small mind. With small mind and big mind as the points of departure, to present such a portrayal, I used a three-dimensional setup for the exhibition rather than hanging the paintings on walls. I wanted to enclose ordinary open space with paintings on stands arranged in a square shape in order to create a separation from the rest of the room. Within the enclosure, (small mind,) many realities, expressed by the paintings, were paths of exploration that exist within and extend beyond small mind. Big mind was the whole gallery and all who came to it.

I also chose to use a square because the shape suggests harmony, strength and balance, as well as being a pleasing and practical shape with which to work. It would not only represent the artificial enclosure of small mind, but also a stable, grounded-in-meditation small mind within big mind. Moreover, besides wanting the peaceful state of a square form, I also wanted one that would best display and contain the strong colors from the surrounding pictures that I hoped would fill the enclosed space with a radiant atmosphere. Seeing the vibrations of colors emanating from the pictures, the viewer would be engaged upon entering the area, allowing the impact of the square enclosure as well as the individual paintings to be felt together. The first impression was considered important since the setup was also meant to elicit a feeling of entering an inner garden of possibilities.

There were fourteen paintings arranged in the square, 11 feet x 11 feet, three paintings to a side, with a 12-inch space between each painting. The fourth side, the entrance into the square, was composed of two double-sided paintings with the space between them left open. Each painting was 65.5 inches x 36 inches and raised 12 inches on a wooden stand. The square was separated 18 inches from the walls on three sides. The entrance into the square faced the door side of the gallery. Another painting, 60 inches x 60 inches, was horizontally suspended, 10 feet high, over its center. Beneath it was a bench. A final painting, 32 inches x 24 .5 inches, was hung by the door.

In nihonga, expression of the “moment” has always been reason enough for painting. In both traditional and modern nihonga, delicately or dramatically painted subjects, whether birds, flowers, people, insects or landscapes, appear cherished equally as remarkable and ordinary. Showing the Buddhist influence in the culture, nihonga artists tend to paint the ephemeral nature of existence. Life and death are brought together in one moment as a theme, not for an expression of sorrow, but as one for celebration. The beautiful cherry blossoms are loved as a subject precisely because they fall so soon after opening. “Everything as it is,” “the suchness of things,” or “everything changes” are phrases often heard in Buddhism. These find expression in nihonga in common subjects that are portrayed with a sense of wonder, tranquility and beauty.

Because of the complexity of the subject of *Pathways*, I wanted the uniformity that accompanies a given style to come from the Buddhist themes and from my efforts to bring about a resolution of each work in accordance with the harmony of the whole. I wanted to allow the possibilities of unpremeditated approaches, unforeseen directions, or surprising connections of color and form. Besides being an opportunity to experiment with new forms in painting, my personal interpretation of Buddhist experiences required a more fluid and free painterly expression than might be provided by conventional representation or Buddhist iconography. At completion, my paintings, when internally unified, were to have indirectly developed styles, not planned ones, but ones that would grow out of day-to-day experiences, perceptions, emotions, feelings, thoughts and ideas. I felt confident that the paintings would develop their own logic as I worked. I did not intend to edit for conformity, but for interior expression. The results came from meditative perceptions as well as objective observations. Rather than being paintings that originated in my mind, I

felt that they were, instead, a confirmation of existent forms within, or a part of a universal language that all people share.

The paintings themselves, other than the theme, accordingly developed without a plan. As they progressed, a sense of cooperation between all the elements present, myself included, developed. This was a feeling of inner and outer unity with the painting and surroundings. On the days when a harmonious connection with the picture was not present, I often sat through the entire day in silent observation of the unfinished work without painting. Most of the time I faced the painting in a meditative way. This was less a matter of staring than of making a continuing perceptual, rather than rational, reevaluation of my palette. Sometimes impatient, I would paint anyway, but the results were usually poor and were washed off or painted over the next day.

Rather than play with form as an end in itself, each form had an integral meaning in the development of the work, and each brush stroke, splatter, wash or mark, however small, was a necessary part of the pictorial fabric. The images were constructed by painting for subtle nuances, by relying on the brushes for spontaneous swift gestures and strokes, by carefully adding lines, or by aligning strokes and gold leaf in patterns decided upon at the moment. Although I sometimes made unplanned decisions, the work was mainly done by deliberation, an observation without goals for as long as was necessary. By using my own intuitive perceptions of color meaning and understanding of color harmonies, I found that I could use color with confidence and creativity. The completion of every painting was different, but each was finished when the overall effect of the color and form seemed to ‘crackle’ with life and also, to my mind, even with sound.

Etienne Gilson stated that when a group of people look at something together that all agree is beautiful the result is often silence, but if they were to explain why it was beautiful they would not agree, least of all the artist. Rather than being an objective experience, beauty is an ontological one. Perhaps recognizing beauty is, indeed, just witnessing, without preconceptions, *being* in a multitude of forms. While painting, a feeling of certainty is important to me, but preconception is the biggest obstacle. A form-in-the-making, such as a painting, often suggests directions that seem more convenient to take than waiting to express a truer form from the interior, which can be time-consuming.

Many times simple solutions to compositional or aesthetic problems come to mind, but I want to discover more complex relationships of color and form than my external knowledge offers. Resisting easy solutions has been a major struggle in every painting.

The images in *Pathways* are personifications of Buddhist experiences. (Refer to the floor plan for their position in the installation.) The names of the paintings and what they stand for are:

Pathway 1 Dragon (small work); symbolizing enlightenment

Pathway 2 Goddess

Pathway 3 Manjusri Bodhisattva Mahasattva (Monju); cutting through delusion

Pathway 4 Samantabhadra Bodhisattva Mahasattva (Fugen); having enlightened activity

Pathway 5 Vairocana Buddha (Dainichi Nyorai); awakening to original Being

Pathway 6 Acala (Fudo-o Myo-o); having equanimity in facing and overcoming obstacles

Pathway 7 Fudo-o Myo-o's Doji 'attendant'; help in overcoming obstacles

Pathway 8 Bhaisajjaraja 'Medicine King Buddha' (Yakushi Nyorai); healing

Pathway 9 Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva Mahasattva (Kannon); awakening compassion

Pathway 10 Shakyamuni Buddha; awakening enlightenment

Pathway 11 Maitreya Bodhisattva Mahasattva; becoming a future Buddha

Pathway 12 Sarasvati (Benzai Ten); protecting the arts and bestowing abundance

Pathway 13 Kissho Ten; bringing good fortune and protecting children

Pathway 14 Dragon (large work); symbolizing enlightenment

Pathway 15 Mahastamaprapta Bodhisattva Mahasattva (Seiji); having enlightened activity

A buddha or *nyorai* is a fully enlightened being. *A bodhisattva* is one who vows to help others. *A mahasattva* is a great bodhisattva who, even after enlightenment, chooses to remain in the world to help others. *A myo-o* is a heavenly king. *A ten* is a deity