



Painting to Be

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The creative artist has something in common with the hero. Though functioning on another plane, he too believes that he has solutions to offer. He gives his life to accomplish imaginary triumphs. At the conclusion of every grand experiment, whether by statesmen, warrior, poet, or philosopher, the problems of life present the same enigmatic complexion. —Henry Miller¹

Ron Mills goes to the studio like the rest of us go to our beds. He goes to the studio just as we go to our kitchens for food. He goes to the studio as we breathe. Yes, he breathes, eats and sleeps like the rest of us; but, really, what *does* he *do* there, in the studio?

While “painting” describes the material conditions of Mills’s physical effort, it fails to adequately account for the metaphysical conditions of his emotional engagement—for to paint (especially, but not exclusively, as an “abstractionist”) is to confront one’s being, raw and uncensored. Mills paints his life; he paints *to be*. He fashions his *becoming* in the studio. His canvases invite us to do the same—both in contemplation before them and, simultaneously, to go to our own studios (and, if we don’t have one, his example encourages us to construct our own).

But, why should we care? Because the canvases are not to be dismissed as the detritus of a shallow, narcissistic gambit; rather, they offer us the opportunity to directly confront our own being. Metaphysically speaking, Mills’s paintings enable us to discover our “humanness.” His work offers the momentary opportunity to confront our own, unique self (almost as if the surfaces were psychic mirrors) and transcend the trauma of daily life (a realm occupied by opposites and oppositions within humanity). This transfiguration corresponds with Nietzsche’s concept of “will to power” (or therapeutic will) whereby opposites coalesce into a *deification of experience*. The act of looking at the painting, like the studio activity itself, is a creative process. Open-ended and marginally representational, these fields of color and line, gesture and rhythm offer us windows that open up to the “unsayable” of our shared humanity.

The endless interpretations which are offered up contribute nothing, except to heighten the significance of what is seemingly unintelligible. This unintelligibility somehow makes profound sense.²

Entering his fifth decade as an accomplished artist, Ron Mills has recently completed two large-scale mural cycles. Two of four panels in the first cycle, *Origins: An Allegory of Creative Transformation*, were painted during the fall 2010 at the School of the Integrated Arts in Santa Ana, Costa Rica. The second mural cycle consisted of three large panels (*Community, Otherness, Nascence*) and was unveiled at the

Hallie Ford Center for Healthy Children and Families on the campus of Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon on September 8, 2011.

Yet, during the same time he completed these projects, Mills produced several interrelated series of paintings, each produced in different studios: one in Oaxaca, Mexico, another in the Eola Hills of Willamette Valley and a third in a *plein-air* garden studio in Portland, Oregon. Remarkably, Mills establishes studio space in all of his residences, no matter how brief the stay, throughout his life's substantial journeys. Indeed, Mills's long-standing commitment to painting as a means of "working through" (*durcharbeiten*) his personal conflicts and joys, losses and triumphs as well as recording emotional swells, sorrows and joys remains unchanged from his early adulthood.

If anything, Mills's resolve to paint as a therapeutic, meditative practice has increased as he has matured. Mills's biography, one lived fully (if not fulsomely), includes many cliffhangers and twists. The longest-standing anchor in his life's fluctuations has been his professional affiliation with Linfield College which has afforded him the opportunity to live as an artist-professor. And, where one identity ends and the other begins cannot be discerned because, for Ron Mills, they have been from the outset fused, as Walter Benjamin famously opined: "An artist who does not teach other artists teaches no one."³

From an early age, certainly by the time he was in his teens, Mills needed to draw and paint as a matter of course. Yes, this is a common, even trite detail of any artist's life; but, in Mills's case, this "need to create" manifests itself in a manner that transcends the rule; his integration of an on-going routine and vigorous studio practice eclipses the working habits of many other life-long artists (I've never known an artist, regardless of medium, to be as prolific and consistent as Mills).

His mother, an accomplished "Sunday painter" (and the Sabbath resonated deeply in this Missouri home), modeled artistic behavior by routinely painting murals in the family dining rooms. Mills's mother studied painting in Germany during the 1950s, and even at 92 is *still* painting. Most importantly, this mother's naïve social realism graciously provided the budding artist something explicit to react against.

As a result, the mark of the brush and brash wanderlust brought Mills to study art and philosophy in Southern California during the 1970s. Actually, he added the study of philosophy to counter his own sense of insecurity regarding his rural, Midwestern upbringing while surrounded by peers who grew up in lively, cosmopolitan centers like New York and San Francisco. To compensate, Mills alternated between grappling with Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and Wittgenstein and wrestling with canvas, brush and paint. Yet, from the outset, Mills's fused these two practices—not merely in the reductive sense that his reading informed his painting—but that his painting validated his reading. Each practice reinforced and clarified the other.



As a dodge to deflect being exposed as a fraud, Mills went to the studio and integrated painting into the very essence of his being. He produced canvases that startled his world-weary peers and found a means of talking about his process that demanded the attention of his mentors. Perceiving an art historical deficiency compared to his more widely-traveled peers (who had enjoyed the opportunity to visit the best museums in the United States and Europe), Mills compensated. And, well, that's an understatement...

Fast forward four decades later...

Ron Mills de Pinyas paints as a means of meditation, a form of therapy, a process of *durcharbeiten*, a way of engaging his body and soul simultaneously, and most importantly, a manner of experiencing life.⁴ Mills's integration of painting into his routine activities distinguishes him from other artists. Instead of working in starts and fits, producing a series and then taking time off, Mills transitions from numerous projects effortlessly and quickly. Why? Because Mills does not paint on speculation; he does not paint for commission alone. Mills paints because he must. But, as a result, Mills gives the rest of us a gift. While in

the studio he may be engaged in the spiritual exercise of leisure (authentic labor) poised on the purchase of time as it unfolds—stimulated and alert to possibility. But, the results of such an effort serve a social need that stretches beyond the needs of the artist's ego and offers us our own reward—the opportunity for disinterested looking or the aesthetic contemplation of a human-made object without the distraction of utilitarian needs, moral beliefs and/or theoretical concerns.

I've watched Ron Mills paint and draw. Many of us have. As anyone who has attended a meeting, lecture or conference in which Mills was in attendance must know, the man simply must make marks. Mills draws or paints daily, and has done so almost his entire life. This is an activity few can claim they have pursued with as much regularity and dedication. He paints like Henry Miller wrote. Substitute the nomenclature of painting for writing in this passage by Miller and a plausible description of Mills's integration of painting into his lived experience is provided:

For the hand that writes there is the mind that reads, the soul that deciphers. Some write syllabically, some cabalistically, some esoterically, some epigrammatically, some just ooze out like fat cabbages or weeds. I write without thought or let. I take down the dictation, as it were. If there are flaws and contradictions they iron themselves out eventually. If I am wrong today I am right tomorrow. Writing is not a game played according to rules. Writing is a compulsive and delectable thing. Writing is its own reward.⁵

Mills paints compulsively and delectably. And, while it is its own reward, the reward transcends to his audience. It is in this transference that I wish to focus the remainder of my commentary. Why do Mills's paintings "work"? And what, precisely, is it that they "do"?

As studies have proven, and contrary to common sense, many human beings (perhaps all of us) are far more alert and prepared to retain information if we doodle while initially exposed to new material. But, for Mills this exercise is not mere mindlessness but a means of fully interacting with the world he inhabits. Keenly attuned to the shapes, lines, shadows, colors, forms of his daily life,



Mills seeks to bring details from his surroundings—detached, isolated images—to his studio practice. That is, Mills does not approach the canvas merely to record the trace of aesthetically apperceptive existential angst. Rather, he goes to the canvas to explore the conflation of issues, both personal and social, that confront him daily. Simultaneously, Mills draws inspiration from the environs he occupies. For instance, the peculiar, harsh shadows that demarcate forms in the Southern hemisphere, and the architectural patterns that repeat in Oaxacan plazas, textiles and folk art influence his hand as he integrates the visual stimuli he records during his daily travels with his mental torpor when he enters the studio.

This Oaxacan work is remarkable because it was produced during Mills's fourth semester-long visit to the city as the lead professor instructing a group of students from Linfield College. Unlike his previous three semesters leading the program, Mills was able to establish a full-fledged painting studio in his living space. Here is a testament to the life of a man who has grown increasingly aware that he must paint in order to live well. Mills recognizes the space of the painter's studio as a sacred and essential den, in which one discovers identity at its core: desublimated, pre-verbal and free of social repression.

And, this is what Mills's paintings do. They depict freedom. But freedom always must be articulated with both the prepositions *from* and *of*. And, in this sense, I mean freedom *from* corporate (or capitalist) commercial enterprise and freedom *of* corporal (or somatic) personal expression. The freedom Mills's paintings proclaim offers a temporary reprieve from the dehumanizing reality of capitalism (and, we are truly dehumanized when, by Supreme Court decree, our government treats international corporations as the legal equivalent of a human being). The corporal reality of the artist at work on himself serves as an antidote against corporate reality of big business at work on us: freedom *from* oppression fosters freedom *of*

expression. This liberation from consumerism enables true freedom *from* the exploitation of the individual which is not to be confused with the so-called “freedom” espoused by reactionaries on the right who demand *laissez-faire* markets for corporations and shout in an echo-chamber reverberating with their angry pleas for freedom *from* regulation, taxation and any kind *of* government oversight. This peculiar, oligarchic freedom is countered by the subversive freedom of the painter:

The ideology of the spontaneous brushstroke is one of freedom—it is made in response to inner needs, or the aesthetic desires, of its independent creator. The spontaneous brushstroke has no boss, no patron, no mouths to feed. The studio as a space for unencumbered individualism is figured in that freely applied paint; the sensuality and generosity of excess pigment conveys broader freedoms that are very appealing, even if they are circumscribed by the narrow boundaries of an individual taste. We are invited by the artist to identify with that freedom, to be constructed as that individual, in viewing his art. In that case, the more heroic the better, we say.⁶

Mills’s paintings are interesting because they integrate prosaic, if potentially poetic, visual experiences we all share with his own emotional states to arrive at canvases that are simultaneously idiosyncratic yet uncannily familiar. A Mills painting may suggest, the dappled shadows of light through a deciduous tree, patterns cast by wrought iron railings, ephemeral forms dancing in the shadows cast by banners or flags flapping in the wind, the reverse roll of a car’s headlights on an interior room at night, the articulated light passing through window shutters, the cellular, fractured reflections of stained glass. Each of these chromatic anecdotes serve as inspiration for Mills as he layers his canvases with the details of his immediate context, both as regards his physical surroundings and his emotional state.



Although these paintings do not rely on an overt figurative narrative, the work is a residue of Mills’s lived experience. Imbedded within the work are his emotions, his passions, his regrets, his joys and sorrows—both swooning and mourning. Although never explicitly declared, Mills’s abstractions are not, as a result, void of content. The content, however, requires the viewer’s introjection. For the joy and pain lurking in the canvas as part of the artist’s life is not, precisely, where the meaning of such a work resides. That is, the conditions that produced the painting are not exclusively the domain of its interpretation. For, if that is the case, then the work has a limited purview. Rather, the viewer’s experience with the canvas is not ancillary to the artist’s. In fact, the viewer’s encounter with the forms, colors, lines and gestures are equally as relevant to the work’s meaning as the artist’s intent.

We speak of the “work” of the artist, and that term should be explored for all it implies. The “work” of painting belongs to the domain of leisure. Leisure, we must recall, does not mean mere and mindless entertainment, but rather a luxury for those humans who are free from oppression and opportunity to improve themselves through intellectual, and hopefully, creative engagement. As a result, to labor as a painter is to be free of the exploitative conditions experienced by those who are alienated and dehumanized and toil on behalf of international corporations that perpetuate the soft fascism of late capitalism. The canvases, and the work evident to produce them, is subversive, even as, or especially because, they avoid the overt hectoring of *art engagé*. Indeed, the freedom signified in the trace of the artist’s abstractions (or substitute any of a litany of similar art terms, each with their own connotations and shortcomings—non-figurative, non-objective, “concrete,” etc.) is a political statement.

The resistance implied by these surfaces suggests the true freedom of “humanness”—the very conditions that enabled them to exist in the first place. As Theodor Adorno explains:

[A]rt becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as “socially useful,” it criticizes society by merely

existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it. There is nothing pure, nothing structured strictly according to its own immanent law that does not implicitly criticize the debasement of a situation evolving in the direction of a total exchange society in which everything is heteronomously defined. Art's asociality is the determinate negation of a determinate society.⁷

Mills's work offers a glimpse of the true benefit of social democracy in which the distribution of the world's resources and resulting wealth is, at the very least, more equitable. It offers a glimpse of the fruit progressive resistance promises—an expansion of leisure time for all to “work” on ourselves, to fully realize and live our humanity within a community of others equally empowered. The production of abstract art resists typical modes of production in our techno-industrial and hypermediated culture of material excess. Mills's canvases are handmade—they are *craft*. They are the end-product of the efforts of autonomous work, for the most part, in solitary.

Very little that is manufactured in the contemporary world (and that includes much of today's art) is handmade by a single artisan toiling alone in the studio. Mills creates physical, handmade, “analogue” objects for a society enthralled by the “digital” spectacle of daily life. Such an act is dissident, but it is also a revelation...and an invitation. “*You too!*” his canvases declare. We should be so inclined to also indulge leisure time, which is not to be confused with idle entertainment (yet another form of alienated labor as the endless wash of advertisements inform us of precisely the conventions that Mills's paintings defy). And, our ability to view them in the context of the art gallery is also an example of the disalienated “labor” of leisure. For, by the peering into these surfaces and contemplating these compositions of form, line, color which suggest infinite variety, a salubrious effect is created. As Sigmund Freud suggests:



Foremost among the satisfactions we owe to the imagination is the enjoyment of works of art; this is made accessible, even to those who are not themselves creative, through the mediation of the artist. It is impossible for anyone who is receptive to the influence of art to rate it too highly as a source of pleasure and consolation in life. Yet the mild narcosis that art induces in us can free us only temporarily from the hardships of life; it is not strong enough to make us forget real misery⁸

Sure, Mills provides his viewers with a “mild narcosis,” but his lived example offers us something much more. The sensual surfaces grant us the opportunity to abandon the goal-directed, repressive pragmatics of daily life in an acquisitive go-go society. His works encourage us to slow down, examine and contemplate not just the canvases themselves, but also the peculiar visual incidences that flit past us perpetually—to look closely, to observe.

Close observation is, once again, a dissident act. Why? Because it forces us to step outside the conventions of the status quo into a realm that is extra-symbolic, extra-linguistic, metaphysical: “the aesthetic is constituted by an artistic act of subversive defiance against the conventions and norms of communication and the social world and ideology they constitute.”⁹ Mills dares us to join him in that magical realm of surface where figure dissolves into ground, where paint becomes an analogue for life, where visual incident becomes metaphor for “humanness” and where freedom is located in gesture.

¹ Henry Miller, “Creation” from *Sexus* reprinted in *Henry Miller on Writing*, Thomas Moore, Ed., New York: New Directions, 1964, p. 32.

² *Ibid.*, 33.

³ Walter Benjamin, "The Artist as Producer," (1934), *Reflections*, Edmond Jephcott, trans., New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978, p. 233.

⁴ On August 20, 2011, Ron Mills and María Isabel Piñas Espigulé married. To mark this life change, Mills added "de Pinyas" to his name as a testament to his commitment. And, clearly, this relationship was the primary driver of his creative impulses. While we could read these canvases as love poems, to do so would be overly reductive and miss the larger lessons regarding the "humanness" contained within them.

⁵ Henry Miller, "Reflections on Writing," from *The Wisdom of the Heart* as reprinted in *Henry Miller on Writing*, p. 104.

⁶ Caroline Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 10.

⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), *Theory and History of Literature*, Vol. 88, Robert Hullot-Kentor, ed. and trans., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 225-6.

⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), David McLintock, trans., London: Penguin Books, 2002, p. 22.

⁹ Donald Kuspit, *Visual Art and Art Criticism: "The Role of Psychoanalysis,"* *Signs of Psyche*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 312.