

Michael Franklin: “Art as Contemplative Practice: Expressive Pathways to the Self”

A Review and Reflection by Rainbow Tin Hung Ho

迈克尔·富兰克林：“作为沉思实践的艺术：通往自我的表达途径”

何天虹 的回顾与反思

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Abstract

Arts as a contemplative practice allows expression of oneself and a unique descent into emotions, and at the same time, connection with culture and spirit. This solitary but not lonely journey resonates with the paradoxical coexistence of different phenomena in our lives. This book not only describes the processes and experiences of art as a contemplative practice, its insights and inspiration, if contemplated, can be extended and expanded to many aspects, regardless of discipline and culture.

Keywords: arts, contemplative, culture, insights and inspiration, paradoxical coexistence

摘要

作为沉思实践的艺术，允许表达自己和容许独特的情感沉淀，同时，与文化和灵性相联系。这种孤独但不寂寞的旅程与我们生活中不同现象的矛盾共存产生了共鸣。这本书不仅描述了艺术作为一种沉思实践的过程和经验，它的见解和启示，如果沉思，可以延伸和扩展到许多方面，不受学科和文化的限制。

关键词: 艺术，沉思，文化，洞察力和灵感，矛盾的共存

Michael Franklin’s book invites readers to undertake an in-depth reflection on what happens during the art creation process, in relation to the self, others, and the universe. With my experience as a therapist, artist, researcher, and teacher, I brought these four (different) perspectives to this review, viewed through the lens of my Chinese culture. I was stunned by the book’s richness, presented as multilayered knowledge and insights that resonated across all my experiences and viewpoints. Insights came in nearly every paragraph and often from single sentences.

The three parts of the book offer readers a comprehensive review and a window into art as contemplative practice. Part I explains the historical roots and foundations in the East and West, about how art has been practiced for contemplative purposes; Part II provides an in-depth analysis of the connection among art, yoga, and meditation (the two commonly practiced contemplative activities); Part III provides readers with working

principles and practical exercises for implementing art as a contemplative practice. Although each part of the book offers readers different information and experiences, concepts and thoughts intertwine and echo between chapters. The more one reads, the more profound insights one can extract from the pages.

Form and formless, from descent to ascent

I was drawn by Franklin's discussion on the form and the formless as well as the link between the two. Franklin reveals art expression as form-based when thoughts and emotions are expressed in visual images, sound, movement, or writing. That is also the process of "descending," giving the shape and form to something abstract or imaginal. This art creation process can also be called *poiesis*. Franklin explains: "Poiesis represents diverse processes of human discovery embedded in the creation of artworks. Exploration of these artistic practices reveals inherent relationships between ideas, intentions, and actions" (p. 85).

The artistic creative process is thus from formless to form-based. However, form in art is never static. Franklin states, "[t]o form is to transform" (p. 114). He uses clay work as an example, citing the step-by-step transformational process that the original piece of raw clay goes through, to change from one form to another as the art emerges. The change process results in the formation of something new that inherently combines all previous experiences yet emerges as a new form, unlike its previous self. The new form will open to new experiences and invite new insights. Any art material contains implicit transformative healing metaphors.

Moving from artistic experience to spiritual experience is a process of transformation, from form to formless. Franklin describes that this occurs when one develops a deeper experience of, or connection with, the artwork; when one enters into the spiritual moment of the process, there will be the formation of image-sight. This occurs in an imaginary space where the "form" is gradually dissolved, and the experience expands and ascends into "formless" (pp. 4–6).

I have described a similar process in my writing, on the contemplative attribute of movement in dance movement therapy (Ho, 2021). When one is fully immersed in dancing, a deeper connection between the self and the movement is established, as the movement becomes the "embodied expression of the mind" (p. 32). The full presence of body and mind moving together can lead to an altered state of consciousness, and to the unity of conscious and unconscious, as what occurs in cathartic dances in spiritual and ritual contexts, or authentic movement. Regardless of whether the movement is quiet or vigorous, the emotional connection and the sense of wholeness can lead to transcendence, an experience beyond any movement form.

Moving from form to formless also incorporates the need to let go. Franklin connects this with the attitude of non-attachment in meditation. He experienced this process himself when he realized his contemplative art practice by unlearning his academic training and relearning the contemplative ideals. I concur with Franklin on this formless transformation in the contemplative process—partly from my personal experience in Zen meditation and partly from my Chinese culture. In fact, the formless

and non-attachment attitude is the ultimate or the highest achievement in learning and doing, in all disciplines in Chinese cultures—*wuwei* or actionless by Laozi (1972), which emphasizes letting things take their natural course without interference.

Emptiness versus fullness

An attitude of non-attachment, or detachment, is the key to the state of emptiness. This is the essence in contemplative practice, as described by Franklin. Only with this transcendence detachment can art be made with “effortless effort,” and creation is from the “inner states of emptiness” (p. 49). He defines emptiness as the moment with the minimally preoccupied or “less conceptual mind,” “open attention,” and complete “absorption in the moment” (p. 49). To enter an empty state and allow new experiences and insights to come without bias, one has to give up preoccupied thoughts and knowledge: a process of unlearning and re-learning and a process of dispassion or *wuwei*.

Miyamoto Musashi, an undefeated champion Japanese warrior, described in his book *The Book of Five Rings* the ultimate skill and strategy in fighting as “void” (Miyamoto, 1643). Void is similar to the status of emptiness and nothingness. Only with an empty mind can one keep calm and open all the senses and awareness. With this highest sensitivity, one can respond instantly to an enemy. Franklin also talks about this “bare attention” (p. 39), which he describes as receptive, open awareness. For Musashi, this emptiness allows the truth to be seen; meanwhile, for Franklin, emptiness enables one to enter the spiritual or transcendence space to seek truthfulness. Franklin reflects on this as the Latin root of the word *contemplate* (*contemplaris*), which has the meaning of seeing “things as they really are” (p. 34).

The understanding of emptiness is different between Eastern and Western cultures and potentially reflects the interdependent culture in the East. An example that illustrates this is the concept of space (Ho, 2019). Empty space is usually regarded as unoccupied space in Western culture, which deserves to be filled up. However, in Eastern culture, empty space is not empty because it is full of invisible substance (*qi* or energy). In this regard, emptiness and fullness are fundamentally the same (two sides of the same coin), depending on how they are viewed. This is particularly relevant in relation to contemplative practice, or the art therapy process, where some participants may feel scared to let go or feel uncomfortable when there is silence or when there is nothing to do or nothing is happening during the process. Promoting the concept of fullness in emptiness may assist in reducing their worries and increasing the sense of connectedness.

Paradoxical coexistence: *yin* and *yang*

Emptiness and fullness, form and formless, learning and unlearning, connected and unconnected are all manifestations of the paradoxical coexistence in Chinese philosophy—the *yin* and *yang*, which exists everywhere and governs everything. Even in art creation, Franklin recognizes this contrast: “Art is one way to explore free will while practicing restraint” (p. 150), as putting thoughts and feelings in an art form gives an intrinsic constraint for expression. Later in his book, he describes the paradoxical struggle between staying alone and being connected to others—described

as interpersonal bonding. Franklin shares his contemplative art practice in relation to his cancer experience, and for him, when art is a contemplative practice, many things that exist in opposition can happen simultaneously. Being aware and perceiving all contrasting phenomena seems to be the gateway to healing or wholeness.

Insights and inspiration

Franklin focuses on art, yoga, and meditation in the first two parts of the book. He provides multiple connections among these three practices and helps readers to naturally develop a mind map that gives rise to the idea of art as contemplative practice. He relates breath with spirit and inspiration, where breath is emphasized both in yoga and meditation. He connects mediation and insight as “many methods of contemplative practice consist of turning attention within” (p. 97). Insight and inspiration always go hand-in-hand in spiritual moments. An important cue to connect insight and contemplative practice is imagination. Franklin uses the term “imaginal mindfulness” (p. 93), which he explains as the “non-judgmentally observing the moment-to-moment arrival and evolution of constellating narratives within imagery” (p. 93). He shares his own experience in clay work, where the artwork actually is the manifestation of the “imaginal disclosure” (p. 94) after the open-minded receptive I–thou moment in silence. This “mindful sensorial attention” (p. 35) is the “careful observation of internal phenomena while focusing on external subject matter (landscape) and process (use of materials)” (p. 35). Franklin describes such a process as also being experienced by impressionist painters.

Attending to the substance, rather than the object, has been identified as a difference based on language and culture (Rips & Hespos, 2019). Traditional Chinese arts value imaginary work and symbolic presentation, rather than reality and accuracy (Wang, 2009). The way that Chinese artists paint is an example of this. Chinese artists usually create their artworks according to the images in their minds after observing the actual landscape. What the artists pay attention to is not only the actual scene but also the sensory experiences and the feelings of being in the landscape. Thus, Chinese artists address the atmosphere and spirit of the landscape—the substance rather than the actual scene—and attempt to present the essence of it. Similar approaches have been adopted in Chinese dance where artists are encouraged to turn the reality into fictitious or symbolic representations (Chen, 2009).

Arts as contemplative practice: universality and uniqueness

In Chinese culture, the coexistence and dynamic equilibrium of the *yin* and *yang* underpin everything, from the stability of the universe to the well-being of a person. Franklin’s discussions on different paradoxical coexistence throughout his book achieve two things. They deepen inspiration of art as contemplative practice, leading readers to see the importance of acknowledging both form and formless existence, the value of the voice and silence in expression, and the destruction and construction process toward unity. His discussions also resonate with cultural differences and offer a bridge that could lead Eastern and Western cultures to heal. Arts as a contemplative practice

allows expression of oneself and a unique descent into emotions, and at the same time, connection with culture and spirit. This “being alone” and “staying connected” paradox becomes an important foundation for building respect and empathy, toward ourselves and with others, across the lifespan, and across cultures.

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