

CONVERSATIONS

By

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CONVERSATIONS

Abstract

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This paper describes a conversation between Thomas Merton, a Trappist Monk, and myself at the Museum of Fine Art at WSU. The informal interview begins by discussing the most recent body of my work entitled *The General Dance*. The conversation quickly moves from one topic to another, unraveling my positions on art and life at every step. The central theme in this conversation revolves around the idea of the importance of integrity and being true to one's self in both life and art.

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Dedicated with love to all of my teachers.

(And yes that means family, friends, professors, artists,
musicians, writers, neighbors and Samaritans.)

Proverbs 27:17

CONVERSATIONS:

Interview with Thomas Merton in the Museum of Fine Arts at WSU

Thomas Merton: Good to see you.

Brad Dinsmore: Good to see you too (shaking hands).

I must begin by asking you about these ceramic pieces.

(Laughing) Yeah, they might seem out of place at first. A lot of people have difficulties with these pieces. They're about life; about the joy of creation.

The joy of the "general dance?"

Exactly. David Hockney said it best describing the painting of his dogs, "People don't understand these paintings. They haven't understood that they're about love and nothing else."

He's a smart man.

Yeah. But even after great and well-respected artists such as Duchamp, Hockney, and yourself...

No, I'm not...

Well, I think so. But the point is that even after Duchamp tells people, "Living is more a question of what one spends time on rather than what one makes" and Hockney painting pictures of his dogs, many artists are still caught up in conceptualism.

They take art very seriously, which is great, but they might be missing a very beautiful side of creation.

What is serious to men is often very trivial in the sight of God. What in God might appear to us as "play" is perhaps what He Himself takes most seriously.¹

So that's the God in me? (Laughs)

Maybe so (Laughing).

I just felt that I needed these in my life. I've received a little flack for making cute little animals, but they have brought me great pleasure. I've had a great time making them. It was fun learning a new medium and working along side with my friend Holly (Campbell). And after the show, I will give these pieces to friends and family. And that might be were the real beauty of these pieces lie. These "kitschy" little creatures will bring more joy to people than any of my pieces in a gallery no matter how conceptually great it is.

You're questioning the function of art?

Yeah, but it's really a new idea. Sometimes I put on my logical cap and ask myself questions. And it's important to be honest to yourself. I could make a great political statement on canvas or whatever and hang it up in a gallery, but who is going to see it? I could tell people about the social injustices and

¹ A passage taken directly from Merton's own words in the last chapter titled "The General Dance" in his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*.

how terrible war is, but honestly from my experiences most people that I encounter in art galleries and museums tend to be pretty socially progressive and think war is bad (laughs). Talk about preaching to the choir. So when it's all said and done, what have I really accomplished?

I think that it comes down to choosing the best medium to communicate your idea. Sort of like Sol LeWitt's quote suggests, "the idea becomes the machine."² If your aim or concept is to make people aware of some sort of social injustice, then you might want use your creativity and figure out a more effective way to achieve your goal. (Pause) You know, find the best way to accomplish your objectives. Sometimes visual art is not the proper medium for communicating your ideas. Artists as people, should be aware of this.

I think I understand what you are saying. But I am not sure of your position on activist art...

Well, I don't mean to talk down upon making art about politics and war and such. In fact I think that it's great. The only things I am saying are to choose the best method to accomplish your goals and to be yourself.

Be honest to who you are. Don't try to be Boltanski or Matisse or Duchamp. Be yourself!

² Referring to Sol LeWitt's *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* of 1967

I agree. Many of your peers fail to become artists for the same reason that many religious men are not saints: they never succeed in being themselves. They never get around to being the particular artist or the particular monk they are intended to be by God. They never become the man or the artist who is called for by all the circumstances of their individual lives.³

There can be an intense egoism in following everybody else. People are in a hurry to magnify themselves by imitating what is popular -- and too lazy to think of anything better.⁴

There's a Finnish proverb that says, "God did not create hurry."

I believe that there is truth to that. Hurry ruins saints as well as artists. They want quick success and they are in such haste to get it that they cannot take time to be true to themselves. And when the madness is upon them they argue that their very haste is a species of integrity.⁵

So what do you think of these pieces?

They make me smile. I believe there is a honesty to them.

There is. They are honest and that seems to be the problem for most (pause) trained artists. And maybe they're right. Maybe

³ A passage taken directly from the opening line in Merton's chapter on "Integrity" in his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*. The only alteration I made to his words was exchanging "artists" for "poets."

⁴ A passage taken directly from Merton's chapter on "Integrity" in his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*.

⁵ A passage taken directly from Merton's chapter on "Integrity" in his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*.

a MFA graduate student should be doing something more "conceptual." But who's to say that these little creatures aren't conceptual. The concept is love, life and creation. **(Laughs) I see how they fit into the "General Dance." I have often thought that if you write for God you will reach many men and bring them joy. If you write for men – you may make some money and you may give someone a little joy and you may make a little noise in the world, for a little while. If you write only for yourself you can read what you yourself have written and after ten minutes you will be so disgusted you will wish that you were dead.**⁶

Yeah, I had never really thought about that before. But I see what you're saying. I think I have made these ceramic pieces and all of my work for the right reasons or at least with good intentions. I know I am not trying to turn this drawings, paintings, and ceramic animals into money. If I was concerned about making money I would have chose a different profession. But I am not sure that I made them for God. For me, my work has been has been about personal discovery. My series over there (pointing towards the *Epistemological Pursuits* installation) came from me investigating how knowledge is constructed or by me trying to find some sort of truth.

⁶ A passage taken directly from Merton's chapter titled "Sentences" in *New Seeds of Contemplation*.

And how is that not for God?

Well I guess it was for me and Him both. But it didn't start that way. It's amazing at what you find...

Or What finds you.

Right. It's like I was walking around in the woods looking for a path to take and then realizing that I was making my own. One has to remain open to "happy accidents."

"Happy accidents?"

"Happy accidents" are what Bob Ross refers to the unintentional marks that happen in his paintings. In his show *The Joy of Painting*, he would often reassure his audience that "We don't make mistakes, we have happy accidents." On one level he was telling his students not to worry about perfection and that our imperfections were not imperfections at all. He was also saying that these "accidents" might just be what we are looking for in a way. On another level, he seems to be alluding to structures of life, suggesting that everything happens for a reason.

I see. So tell me about the rest of this installation?

Well, you can see that behind the ceramic pieces are an array different styles and concepts. The largest is this painting called *We're in this Together*. As you can see it is a picture of me looking into the eyes of a Chia Pet cat.

Laughs. What is that cat saying?

"Ba, ba, ba, ba, ba, ba, I feel free." Its the lyrics to the Cream song *I feel free*.

Laughs.

I got the idea for this piece when I was preparing the Chia cat by placing him in the water. As soon I placed him into the water, I "heard" him say, "Well, we're in this together." So when I was painting this in my studio a few days later, the Cream song came on and it just seemed to speak to me in a way that it previously hadn't. So it was fitting to include this "happy accident."

The other pieces, like *Dustin* and *John Alan Ahola* are simply about painting and drawing the people that are important to you. I don't feel like one needs to justify painting friends and family.

I agree. So tell me about your other work.

Let's walk over to the *People and Proverbs* installation. This work is kind of self-explanatory. It's about people and proverbs.

So I see.

Yeah. I guess that this series branched off from my *Epistemological Pursuits* series.

Your interest in knowledge?

Yes. (Pause) It all started when I was visiting my Grandparents' house for Christmas in Astoria. Because I stayed the night over there, I went to bed earlier than I was used to. So I was looking through their book collection and came across a book of Scandinavian proverbs. As I read this book in hopes of falling asleep, I made the connection between that book and my (*Epistemological*) *Notebooks* that I was working on.

Long story short, I began researching proverbs for the next couple weeks and ended up filling a blank, ready-made book that I received for Christmas with hundreds of proverbs.

That is when the different facets of my work started coalescing. I realized that my art was really about living. From the *Releasing Ghosts* series to the *Epistemological Pursuits* series, I was interested in living. And I guess there's a spiritual aspect to all of it too.

I read that in the work.

Yeah.

Oh and by the titles (Laughs).

(Laughs) Good. Well I've put it in there. I'm not sure that many pick up on that, but I'm glad you see it.

Tell me about these *Releasing Ghosts* paintings.

Literally they are paintings of Polaroid photographs cut open. They really are about the recognition of the beauty of

life. I know that might sound really vague, but for me I understand the beauty and joy of life by remembering different stages of my life. Or maybe it's more by people, events, and things in my life.

I think I understand.

So I was cutting open these pictures to release these memories. They don't necessarily represent one specific memory; rather they are more about a mood or feeling. When I think of a memory it often isn't just about that one memory. It's tied to a web of memories and people and things. So that is why they appear abstract, even though they aren't.

That's the interior of a Polaroid?

Yeah. They're beautiful. They always separate a little differently. I might look into how they were cut a little differently than most people, but don't you think it is interesting, how they split?

Yes. Happy accidents right?

(Laughs) Yes. I had little control of how these photographs split. But they always seemed to reveal something more than just their interior.

Why Polaroids? Was it because they could be cut open more easily?

For me the instant film had a deeper conceptual backing or something tangible about it. The Polaroid instant photo almost has a life of its own. It is self-contained and its chemical reaction is dependent on several factors. The Polaroid is also unique because it not only documents an event; it's a documentation or relic of the event because it was there physically. It helps shape the event or experience in a way.

Beyond that, Polaroids carry a certain nostalgic quality, especially now since they don't make them any more. But they look like photos too. These painting wouldn't work if the photos were some rectangular print, the negative is just as important.

I see. (Pause: looking at the paintings) These are beautiful.

Thank you.

They're full of joy and sadness. (Long pause). Was it hard to paint over the figures?

No. In fact, it was really liberating. Sure I spent a considerable amount of time rendering the human figure, which was me, but the "letting go" or the painting over myself was almost cathartic. I don't know; I can't explain it.

I don't want to speak for you, but maybe it is you detaching from yourself.

That could be.

We're running short on time here.

Oh. You're right. I've got to meet with my committee.

I know. I've all the time in world.

So are there any more questions that you wanted to ask me?

I'm sure you've a brain-full of ideas for future projects.

Yeah.

So what's next? Are you going to continue with these ideas or are you moving on to something quite different.

Well, You of all people should know that is a hard question to answer.

(Laughs).

I can't predict what my next move is, but I am excited to push and expand upon my current projects. They're all still quite fresh. In fact, I really shouldn't even be writing a thesis on them. (Laughs).

(Laughs).

But I feel that I'm on the right path now. I'm smart enough to know that these pieces are stepping stones that will hopefully lead me down the right path.

I do have some new ideas for new directions, but I'm just going to wait and see what happens.

That's a good idea.

I have plans for making four more paintings for the *Releasing Ghosts* series. That will give me ten. And I'm kind of excited about having more time to read and make music.

Music?

Yeah, I am the true definition of amateur.

A lover.

Of course. I love playing guitar. It really is meditative for me.

Besides art and music, I am excited to engage with the world outside of graduate school. Hopefully I get a job teaching, but we'll see what the Lord has planned for me.

Thanks for meeting with me.

The pleasure's mine (shaking hands).

We'll have to talk again.

We will. (Pause) Oh, and Bob told me to tell you, "Happy Painting and God-bless my friend."

(Laughs).

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