

FrameWork 5/22

Sandra Meigs on Sameer Farooq & Beth Stuart



Image from *Tantra Song: Tantric Painting from Rajasthan* by Franck André Jamme, copyright 2011, Siglio Press

Vision and Emptiness

In meditation any one of the senses can be a doorway to awareness. Vision can be a very powerful one.

Discussion in any of the ancient spiritual practices can serve up abundant metaphors. Vision is particularly rich with metaphor. It can be equated with Enlightenment itself. Vision can be said to open up the Divine Light. Of all the senses, luminosity, brilliance and knowing, are said to flow forth through vision. In Open Eye meditation, one can achieve the Supernatural Eye which is said to open access to what lay beyond the known.

Consider the eye as an organ, like a camera. It is a lense with an aperture, an empty black hole. When the aperture makes contact with a thing, that creates a mental image (actually an imprint on the retina which travels on the optic nerve to the occipital lobe in the brain). One can call this mental image “eye consciousness”. That thing has arisen with one’s having perceived it. There it is. It has arisen. In this consideration, vision is a doorway for the meditator into the co-arising of the world. That is, in a sense, the world arises through the body of the person who is in the process of perceiving it. In this way, one’s consciousness plays a vital part in the fullness of the world.

In Open Eye meditation one does not focus on a single thing but rather on the awareness of vision itself. The openness that visual awareness allows can, paradoxically, become emptiness. That is, the more widely one’s vision expands into the universe, the more empty the lenses become, seeing beyond, into emptiness. How could this occur? Consider that the images our brain forms materialize through light entering the lense. This light permeates, and fills the mind and body into fullness, expanding outward, into the universe. This vastness then opens up and spills into the emptiness beyond. Filled with light, and one with the world, so much a part of the universe, one disappears into it.

As form flowed forth while experiencing \neq the *Bongard paintings*, by Beth Stuart and *I opened up the radio but there was no-one inside*, by Sameer Farooq, I was reminded that meditation, like art, can be a mad mad dive into ecstatic abstract form.

Beth Stuart’s diptychs auto-generate left-right comparison, a very active visual experience.

I could feel my eyes moving left side, right side, see a detail on the left, then my eye moved right and sought the same detail on the right side, then back again to see the larger left, then back to see the large right, and on and on. An ear of purple corn in the middle of the left, red corn in the middle of the right. Some floating blood cells on the left, women wearing bonnets on the right, both ears of corn enclosed inside depictions of weird, inward scoping, upholstered frames. But both sides look different and both look the same!

The generation of left-right comparison also caused me to “image” the diptych itself as oneness, one thing. The quick movement of my eyes unified the two canvases into oneness, sameness, all worldliness. I began to experience the two paintings as a doorway, (the doorway to pure awareness?) This was emphasized by the closeness of the two canvases to the floor. I “imaged” this doorway with open eyes. Open open open. What lay beyond: the openness of infinite emptiness.

As the doorway opens, so does the emptiness of the self. As Tich Nhat Hanh said, “Emptiness means to be full of everything but empty of separate existence.”¹

Through my conversation with Beth, I came to learn that the work is loosely based on the Bongard puzzle, comparative diagrammatic puzzles invented by the Russian computer scientist Mikhail Moiseevich Bongard in the 1960’s. Attempts to “solve” the puzzles lead to an awareness of a very deep seated abstract form which is, at first, elusive, then the revelation of solving the puzzle opens up a new understanding of the world and of awareness of form itself as pure joy. Mind puzzles unfold into abstract forms: emptiness, openness, white light containing all colour. This is very like meditation.

Sameer's many ceramic forms offered multiplicities of inherently realized or unrealized vessel-like performance. They reminded me of a chorus of sounds, all in a particular scale of sharps and flats, tone and pitch, sung together but with distinctly different voices. I began to riff on each one as a chant, as in the Vāc in Hindu Tantras (OM, the most familiar) wherein the action of the formation of the mouth and tongue, the throat vibration when sounding each syllable, activates the body's oneness with Divine wisdom. Perhaps this was the empty radio I was hearing.

I was engaged in the same auto-generated comparison of the vessels: some shiny black some shiny red some cracked white matte glaze some open some closed, or upside down some tall some squat.

The riser upon which the vessels were placed ritualizes the forms. The top display shelf was too high and far away to my intimate eye. Instead I felt elevated to see beyond the highest works into something beyond. On the other hand, I automatically bowed to the bottom shelf in a demeanour of presence. The intimacy of my gaze upon the lower vessels brought my attention to my open eyes and the awareness within me.

Through my conversation with Sameer I learned that the non-dualist/neo-Vedantic figure Sri Ramana Maharshi, in prescribing meditation practice, used the ideas to rise, to subside and to dissolve. These actions allow the ego to dissolve or to empty into the world. As Sameer said, the action of forming the clay allowed him to practice rising, subsiding and dissolving. The body becomes unified into forming and emptying back into the world. Or as Thich Nhat Hanh said, to become full of everything but empty of separateness from the world.

Sometimes while getting lost at work in the studio an artist achieves a clear and pure state of contemplation, a perfection of wisdom, and the enlightened eye. They develop the qualities of a Bodhisattva, with the eye of the Buddha. Or perhaps it is the artwork, creation itself, that has the final realization, that of all seeing and all understanding.

¹ Tich Nhat Hanh, October 11, 1926 – January 22, 2022, was a Vietnamese Buddhist Monk, teacher and writer. He had an enormous influence on spiritual practices throughout the world. This quote is often repeated in writings on his teachings.