PASSAGE: A CONVERSATION WITH ARTIST JILL MELLICK

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ABSTRACT: The author interviews Jill Mellick—artist, Jungian psychologist, writer, and scholar—about her process of creating a mixed-media series, “Passage.” Mellick’s attunement to a dream image inspired the series, and her attentiveness and yielding to the dream image’s authority informs her creative process. This conversation—a joint inquiry into the artist’s and viewer’s respective experiences of a body of art—reflects the deepening of their awareness of the image-artist dynamic, and how this understanding might serve to provide a viewer the space needed to join the artist-artwork dialogue. The viewer’s coalescence with the artwork evokes her own image-based inner processes, an experience referred to by Jung as aesthetic animation—not only associative response to an external image or an aesthetic preference of beauty, but also introjection of internal, unconscious processes into the image. A reflexive approach to the interview process uncovers unanticipated meaning, a reminder of the tenuous nature of inquiry.

KEYWORDS: aesthetic animation, art process, artist-artwork dialogue, cross-cultural awareness, dreams, healing, Jungian psychology, reflexivity, resonance, threshold

I was first introduced to Mellick’s teaching and artwork 12 years ago when I was a doctoral student at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. I had read her book on creative approaches to dream work, The Art of Dreaming1, and later resonated with the poetic quality of her landscape paintings, photographs, and drawings. I have long been paying attention to the power of images in my waking life and dreams, and have considered them as messengers of Spirit. Images, symbols, and analogies have been integral to my psycho-spiritual development and work as an art therapist, researcher, and educator for over 20 years. To me, receiving, remembering, expressing, and seeking to integrate images and their perceived meaning into one’s life and life’s work is a practice and an art. I consider Jill Mellick a master in that regard, particularly her mixed media works, which I find a testimony to her unwavering attunement with dream imagery, vision, artistic skill, and transpersonal consciousness2.

In 2011, Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche invited Mellick (2011) to contribute ten mixed media pieces from her “Japan Dreaming” series, which she later renamed “Passage”3. Two other works from this series (Mellick, 2015) were published (backdated) in the International Journal of Transpersonal Studies (IJTS) in 20164. These artworks (different from the ones included this article), were only accompanied by short artist statements, in which Mellick provided the background to the series, summarized in the following Abstract she wrote for the Jung Journal:

In December 2010 and January 2011, floods devastated 70 towns and displaced 200,000 people in Queensland, Australia. In March 2011, a 9.0 earthquake, tsunami, and radiation devastated Northern Japan, left 20,000 dead or missing,
and displaced 430,000 people. Shortly thereafter, Jill Mellick, an Australian and frequent visitor to Japan, dreamt of shredded, faded hangings evocative of *kakemono* (scrolls), *noren* (fabric space dividers), *shide* (paper streamers), *kimono*, and forms resembling *torii* (shrine gates marking entry into sacred space). She explored the dream through mixed media. The title, *Japan Dreaming*, alludes to the Australian Aboriginal Dreaming. As Mellick followed the artwork’s evolution, she also recognized resonance with her own recent experiences of life-threatening illnesses and their aftermath. (Mellick, 2011, p. 108)

I was drawn to what I felt was a healing quality in the “Passage” series, and asked Mellick if she would be open to sharing with me further, through a semi-structured interview, about her art-making process, which she briefly reflected upon in her IJTS article.

Prior to scheduling our conversation, and only having viewed online images of Mellick’s large-scale mixed media pieces, I perceived Mellick’s works as transparent of the artist’s construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of found materials until they appeared to form a new, integral whole. Each piece is unique, but clearly shares a unifying, series identity, about which I wanted to know more. I particularly wanted to explore the Japanese motifs, the pieces display in space, whether Mellick was conscious of their impact on a potential viewer while she was making them, and whether she wanted to elicit a cultural-specific experience that echoed her own.

**Method**

I entered this conversation with a constructivist viewpoint. I was looking forward to the dialogue with Mellick as a joint inquiry—a true inter-view. On my part, I was hoping to get to know the artist behind the images, while at the same time deepening my subjective experience as a viewer. We followed a dialogic approach to interviewing (Way, Zwier, & Tracy, 2015) and a collaborative processing of the transcript (Creswell & Miller, 2000), as I had done in a prior interview of artist Judy Schavrien (Netzer & Schavrien, 2016). The intention was to be probing as well as self-reflective as interviewer and interviewee. This approach recognizes that my questions and interpretations were “circumscribed by the paradigms and disciplines” established through my personal and professional experiences (Chiseri-Starter, cited in Roulston, 2010, p. 210). My prior contact with Mellick in my function as guest editor (see endnote 4) had also primed me for this conversation.

Remaining open to the organic unfolding of this collaborative inquiry exposed my presumptions about Mellick’s images and her creative process, and required constant reflexivity—a “thoughtful, self-aware analysis of the intersubjective dynamics between researcher and the researched…[including] social background, assumptions, positioning, and behavior [which] impact the research process” (Finlay & Gough, cited in Roulston, 2010, p. 116), and which allow researchers and readers to evaluate the research process (Finaly, cited in Roulston, 2010). This
approach to gathering and processing new understanding resulted in the transformation of my presuppositions, and recognition of the psychological constrains and limitations that arose in the process of my subjective response to another person’s imagery and art making.

As in my collaboration with Schavrien (Netzer & Schavrien, 2016), Mellick and I agreed to include as much of the verbatim interview as possible, with the rationale being to provide in this article a qualitative, verbal counterpart to the rich completeness of the visual images, much the same as in a co-curated art exhibit, which is then open to the viewer’s independent encounter with it. The reflexive aspect of this collaboration follows the transcript, and is summarized through the lens of Jungian typology, specifically Jung’s concept of aesthetic animation, as explained later on.

Moreover, exposing the raw data opens the interviewer-interviewee dyad to additional subjective responses, consonance or dissonance. As discussed by Anderson and Braud (2011), readers’ responses serve to establish resonance validity: the relevance and transferability of researcher’s discovery beyond the context of a single qualitative inquiry (in this case beyond the specific insight about Mellick’s art and her creative process). In addition, by preserving the authenticity of our respective voices in this article we hope to leave room for the reader to join the conversation as a discerning witness, not only of content, but also of process (i.e., method), which is essential in establishing the significance and validity of this inquiry as a valuable contribution to the body of qualitative approaches to image-based research. As I have previously discussed (Netzer & Schavrien, 2016), this inter-active approach to interviewing is bound to be a mutually transformative experience, which can be extended to all who engage with it, and can be conceived as a participatory, co-creative experience, what Ferrer (2011) called the “spirit in-between (i.e., the situational dimension of the mystery)” (p. 3), the “creative source of our being” (p. 23). The reader is invited to encounter the dialogue and selected reproductions of Mellick’s artwork, independent from the authors’ subsequent commentary.

**The Interview**

**Dorit Netzer (DN):** When I first encountered your artworks, I wished I could see them in person. I sensed that it would be quite a different experience to stand next to these pieces, but even observing their small online format, the images so powerfully transmitted their presence—very much like a life-size passageway. Despite their diminished scale, backlit on my computer screen, they invited me to enter their space. The artworks in this series communicate to me qualities of receptivity and action (e.g., Figure 1, Open Passage). I want to explore the threshold they mark between where I stand and beyond. Each seems to suggest another possibility, which will remain a mystery until I fully engage and internalize the experience as my own. The nature of the passage seems crucial in the promise of what lies beyond. At the same time, I am curious to know more about the background of these pieces and what ensued prior to your beginning to uncover the pieces from within you. Would you recall the moment you can now, looking back, associate with the beginning of the series, what appeared first?
Jill Mellick (JM): I awoke in the middle of the night with a dream: an image. The image was of a Japanese *noren*, the Japanese fabric divider hung between rooms or on walls, doorways or windows. *Noren* usually have one or more vertical slits cut from the bottom to nearly the top of the fabric so one can part them and walk through. The slit or slits allow easier passage. *Noren* are rectangular, vertical. All I remembered from this dream was a *noren* hanging in space. Not hanging *in* space.
but in... ether. The noren was in space itself. It was thin, worn, faded, battered by the elements.

It was an unusual image. It startled me. I simply thought, “Where did that come from?” and went back to sleep. Often, these kinds of dreams are forgotten. This one was not. It stayed. I cannot tell you now exactly how long it remained with me until a moment came when I decided to attempt to express it. By then, the image felt more like something pressing on me to be born; it was not just being nurtured within; it was crowning.

If I treat an image as an endpoint, I instantly defeat myself. Inner images are departure points for me into their unique form of outer expression. I’m not trying to represent, make, or re-present them. So, with the image of the noren in my consciousness and letting myself experience it as a departure point, I pulled out materials I had at hand and let them... It was a right-brain, quiet process. I let my hands begin to tear things, color things, laid things out on large pieces of paper (Figure 2, Night Passage I). They surprised me. You know the way bulbs naturalize?

![Night Passage I](Figure 2. Night Passage I. Mixed media, 13x12.5 inches.)
Certain spring bulbs bloom once. Others naturalize annually. They spread. In my front garden, some of my bulbs have naturalized. They have done something invisible I do not profess to understand. It was as though this image naturalized in me. It began to pop up in different places. Each piece was the product of that original dream image, yet each was different. I was never trying to make the original image. Each created its own form and had its own authority.

I was aware of this uniqueness even when I was doing each. When I finished one, I would find myself wanting to do more like it, in its general style or mix of mediums. For example, if I were working with pastel and torn paper, I’d find myself wanting to do a series with pastel and torn paper. If I were working with dyes on antique Japanese papers, I would enthusiastically think, “I have to do a whole series just like this.” But it was not the right time. I have not yet done this. I have done 29 to date and each is different—yet related to the original. I have not had time nor felt it was the right time to explore each as a prototype for a series.

Can one explain that ineffable moment when something translates from inside to outside? I cannot. I do remember where I was. I was in my art studio sitting on the floor surrounded by materials. I wanted to make images. I editorialized. My linear, critical side chimed in, “You will not make anything that is as visually strong as what you saw in that dream, Jill.”

But I reminded myself that this was not the point. The image was the departure point, not the end. I told myself, “Just see what happens. It might flop. It might not. That is not your job at the moment. Your job is just to explore the image, bow to the image that was given to you from the unconscious. Spend time with it regardless of outcome.

**DN:** Without assigning meaning prematurely.

**JM:** I do not like to assign meaning. “Meaning” gets in the way. “Meaning” is a framework. Did it “mean” something to me to be doing it? Yes. Did I feel as I was operating from a place in me that was true, real, harmonious? Yes. But when I say “harmonious,” I do not mean pleasant necessarily, but in harmony with what was happening within. Yes, I felt there was meaning in the process. But was I ascribing “meaning” to the content? No. It was not the time for that.

**DN:** You were not calling it anything at that time. It seems as if you were honoring the image as entity without needing to identify it as something outside of itself.

**JM:** I am not sure I was even “honoring an image.” I think I was acknowledging that the image would not let me go and therefore was, I believed, worthy of my attention and attempt to express its presence. The act of doing this was my way of paying homage to the appearance of the image. I wanted to express the experience. I was more interested in the expressing than the outcome.

**DN:** In the sense that you are acting as a witness, an actor, a facilitator birthing the physical expression of that dream image with respect to its trueness?
Your questions allow me to consider new things. When I say “trueness,” I would say I felt it had . . . an inner authority.

An “isness.” You were not going to assign meaning to it but to be there to observe, extract, and express the essence.

Yes.

With that, you were not, I am hearing, considering that this creative and expressive process was acting on you in healing ways. Were you acting on it, and then not until later reflecting on its impact on you?

You in fact, not I, used the word “healing” in association with this work in terms of its process and outcome.

I feel as though “healing” was implicit when you spoke of the devastating events in Japan and Australia that preceded this series. You also spoke of recovering from illness, so I assumed the work was healing . . . It is interesting how in our language, when we have one dichotomy or one extreme of experience, we seek to find equilibrium. Whether it is there or not, we tend to read balance into it. For me, healing is making something whole again.

Mark Strand, the poet, said once that he wrote poetry so that rather being possessed by an emotion, he could take possession of it. That distinction to me is important. One is not making something go away or fixing something but allowing something to contain an experience rather than one’s feeling contained by the experience.

That, to me, is the gift of a metaphor or symbol. Metaphor—meaning, of course, to carry across—carries an experience across into something visible, which then can be contemplated and to which one can be related. In that way, it can be considered to be healing. The image and the making of the image provide a container for the experience itself. One is no longer contained by it—or one is less contained by it. Of course, one might be doing many things at once to metabolize, reflect on, and absorb experiences, good or bad. Expressing the image visually might be just one of the things one does.

So, are you saying that the healing might have been the actual process itself in which you engaged when creating the image, or at least what it evoked in you while creating the artwork? You talked about including and discarding, removing and adding, layering and reducing. All these actions strike me as attempts to uncover and discover the image’s rightful way of being. For me, healing is the ability to make whole what was previously fragmented or ruptured or in turmoil . . .

I respect and have no argument with this description. I am just not sure that that is the way I would say it. Probably my description would be complementary to yours. It seems that what I have described smells like, tastes like, looks like “healing” to you. Perhaps that is indeed what I am describing.
I like what we are doing right now: exploring, letting a word lead us both, saying to ourselves, “Is that in there? What does that mean?” For instance, I am now asking myself whether resonance with an emerging image, freedom to explore paradox, my body becoming still: are those ways I would describe a certain kind of healing? Possibly, I have not thought about it like that.

I just sensed what it is that I am trying to name: I was not feeling damaged at the time that I was making the pieces. Was I damaged when at the time I was doing them? Yes, of course. I was in a protracted process of physical treatment. But healing was not what I was seeking to experience in making these.

The dream image and the subsequent evolution of this series of mixed media images simply bypassed the polarities of illness or healing in me. The series explored what emerges out of nothing. This was the deep question for me: how does one begin again from nothing, whether I was considering the 200,000 people rendered homeless by the floods in Australia in December 2010 and January 2011 or the 20,000 dead and 430,000 displaced in the Japanese earthquake in March, 2011. All were beginning again from nothing. How does that happen? Absolute obliteration—then something emerging from nothing. That was the question I was exploring, living: how does one do that? The dream image embodies this question. The tattered, faded noren is all that’s left (Figure 3, Tidal Wave).

You asked me about my thoughts on transitions and thresholds in this series. A noren is a threshold; a torii gate is a threshold. Each is the space between. A no-space. It is not this space or that space. It is the threshold itself. To experience that place... One cannot really stand in the space between two spaces, the threshold, only experience it. I think this was my deepest inquiry in this series.

Figure 3. Tidal Wave. Mixed media, 16x26 inches.
Only later did I come to realize that my own being had experienced this same devastation and was experiencing something spinning itself from nothing.

**DN:** My use of “healing” might well be reflective of my own need for healing.

**JM:** Well, I hope these pieces allow enough breathing space for each person to bring to them what it is true for each. Only fifty percent of a piece is visible. The other fifty percent is in you. I would not want these pieces to be so declarative that they only make room for my experience. Here again is the theme of a threshold: the threshold lies between us, _between_ where we meet, _between_ what I make and what you see. What you see in them has absolute authority for you. If what you see in them is healing, that is what is there. I cannot say, “I did not plan that” or “That is not what I meant.” How would I know! I was once invited to exhibit landscapes in a group show. The curator reviewed my landscapes. He said, “I want this, this, this and this.” I asked, “What made you choose those?” He said, “You often explore the line where sky and earth meet and what happens at that transition. This group of paintings explores this theme strongly.”

I looked at them and thought, “He is right. How could have I painted these and missed this entirely?” It was out of my consciousness but true.

So, the theme of healing might be obvious to you whereas for me, it might elude. That is all I can say. They could indeed be exactly what you’re saying—for me as well as for you. I know I did not feel that doing them helped me heal in a literal sense. It was as though I were sitting with experiences without attachment to feeling better or worse after doing them. They just needed to come out. Inasmuch as what you and I are both devoted to, the role of the arts in psychospiritual development and inasmuch as we believe that allowing soul to speak through whatever medium it cares to can be a healing or developmental experience, then they have that potential. However, my _intention_ was not to do them for that purpose.

**DN:** This takes me to another question. To what extent were you consciously aware of the cross-cultural aspects of the pieces, as you were creating them?

For me, there are many kinds of thresholds in your work. I think of images as doorways into the artist’s Self and, the artwork as a doorway for the viewer to enter something that was not accessible without it. We have doorways that lead into our homes, into various spaces in our homes. Some are shared with others more or less publicly and others are more intimate—the most intimate of all is the bedroom, which is where we, typically, have our dreams. The many layers I perceive in your work as a viewer, which feel personally intimate, spiritually subtle, yet boldly cross-cultural, make me wonder how do you view the role of these pieces? And do you, as their creator, see yourself as an agent of cross-cultural awareness, stretching your viewer outside of our comfort zone, our own safe homes, to regions where there is a great deal of suffering and despair?

**JM:** None of this happens in a linear or explicable way. Let me mull. Yes, the dream image presented itself as something with a cultural link… If the image
were a kite, its string would be the artistic aspects of the Japanese culture. However, one has to step back further and ask, “What else might be here apart from the fact that Jill was preoccupied with an area of Japan for which she had great affection having been devastated and with her home state in Australia also having been devastated?”

I have had a lifelong interest in the cross-cultural use of the arts for psycho-spiritual development, with certain cultures being more familiar to me than others. The first time I ever set foot in Japan, I resonated with the aesthetic in a way that startled me. I had not experienced that before in relationship to Japanese artwork. But as soon as I stepped into certain aspects of Japanese culture, I felt as though they were external reflections of internal worlds I had not recognized before.

Walking into Shinto shrines, into Buddhist temples, into sand gardens, into rock gardens, something in my spirit, my soul, lit up with ecstasy, with recognition. These spaces and places were saying what I wished I could say. I sensed that if my soul could have spoken clearly, it would have said just these things. So what triggers what? Did my experience in the Japanese culture trigger the dream? Did it inspire the pieces? Did only the dream inspire the pieces? Probably a mélange. If one is using tuning forks, it is almost beside the point which one is struck first and which, second. They resonate.

So, are there situational triggers for the Japanese themes coming through in these works? Yes. Specific spiritual triggers and aspects of the Shinto religion—especially around the interrelatedness of spirit, human, and nature—speak to me, resonate with my preoccupations. The aesthetic of these pieces is something you’ve mentioned several times. While there is not “a” Japanese aesthetic per se, I find, in certain Japanese art styles and traditions, life values to which I feel drawn. All these are reflected in these pieces.

Did I consciously intend to make something look like a kimono? No. Did I consciously intend to make something look like a noren? No. Did I consciously intend to have some look like torii gates? No. Did I recognize as I was making a piece that it was reminiscent of a kimono or noren or torii gate? Yes. My awareness followed a split second behind the interaction of intuition and hand.

Another perspective: many of the qualities to which I relate in Japanese art forms are universal and they transcend culture. I would not insult the Japanese culture or us by trying to be something I am not. My ancestors had roots in four different continents. I live in a fifth. I have no Japanese heritage, but some Buddhist and Shinto philosophy and Japanese aesthetic themes seem to me to express beliefs that hold true cross-culturally.

Thresholds are in every culture. Passages are in every culture. I spent years working with Southwestern Native American communities. Thresholds are important to them. I might just as easily have made pieces that came from that culture—but that is not what I dreamt. Even if I had dreamt it, I probably would not make it because the deepest aspects of Pueblo religion are secret and the images and rituals we are permitted to see only partially understood.
Too, Australian Aboriginal culture, which I had a privilege of studying, also expresses many of the same archetypal themes: thresholds, beginnings, deaths, transformations, suffering, what creates and re-creates itself, the transcendence of paradox. … Over the 30 years I have worked with dreams with people in my practice, I have noted that archetypal dreams do not have predictable or definable qualities of “good” or “bad.” They transcend duality. They simply are. A baby might be thrown out of a car but in the dream this is not necessarily bad. Something in the dream might horrify the dreamer or me in waking life but in the dream, the dreamer experiences joy or some other startling affect. So, we have to go beyond waking attitudes and dualities.

In Sanskrit the words for the polarities of “bliss,” sukha, and “suffering,” dukha, differ only slightly. Some Sanskrit teachers refer to sukha-duka to indicate that each state is determined by the same level of consciousness. Many spiritual paths invite transcendence of these polarities.

In a similar way, this series of pieces defied my labeling of them as, “ugly” or “pleasing to look at.” They simply were. What I have noticed is that they seem to evoke some mix of beauty and death or decay. Almost a wabi sabi quality (Figure 4, Ritual).

**DN:** To me, these pieces do not seem to fit into any prior or existing models of artwork such as traditional landscape or portrait or still life and yet they embody all of these. They are landscapes and portraits of cultures and events in the images that emerged from within you; and they have their own sense of being that is difficult to name even if we are going to associate them with particular objects or artifacts.

Perhaps that is part of what makes this work evocative of the transpersonal—they remain enigmatic and mystical, not in need of being explained away. That is why I said I missed being in their presence, in the presence of their matter, of the material as a doorway to the spiritual; I wanted to touch them, because it was clearly part of your experience while creating them.

**JM:** Absolutely. I confess I have always been a sinner about protecting my hands from art materials. I know one is supposed to use gloves when working with pastel for example. I start out using gloves but soon I pull them off. There is something about touch, embodiment, intimacy … There is something about the intimacy of my hands being on—in—materials, rubbing pastel into paper, tearing and feeling the tearing in my hands, cutting, flinging paint, gathering feathers and sand. … All those things had to happen intimately, kinesthetically, with a tactile component. Yes, I think you probably would have a different experience seeing them in person. Of course, it might be disappointing. Often, things look better when they are back-lit on a screen than they do in person.

**DN:** Can you describe how the pieces were displayed?

**JM:** My ideal for them—and I worked hard at it and I am still working hard at it—was to have them suspended in space just as that original dream piece was. This is easier said than done!
The technical challenges are high. Even when I did suspend them like this, they did not look right... What I had seen originally in the dream was really 4D...It was a time-free, space-free image. It could not translate into a 3D image in a way that was satisfactory to me. They are what is apparently called—and I did not know this term until I met the professional who worked with me on scanning them for limited edition prints—2-1/2D. After I saw the possibilities, I gave the pieces even more freedom because I understood that in addition to the design of the raw materials, I could also let them evolve into 2-1/2D limited edition prints.

Figure 4. Ritual. Mixed media, 21x12 inches.

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I usually laid down the raw materials on horizontal surfaces for scanning. Sometimes, they had to be suspended. The lighting had to be exact. I hand-finished many after the scan. It has been a challenge: I am taking an image that happened in a time- and space-free environment, the dream, and trying to find a way to let it evolve and float free yet still be stable enough to be exhibited.

A year ago, I had a second dream. I saw one after another of these noren. They, too, were suspended, gravity-free, in space. I woke from the dream and this time, I was a less naïve. I just said, “Oh no! How am I going to make this?”

I spent six months last year working with plexiglass, making torii gates in plexi, speaking with woodworkers to see if they could make a succession of small torii gates, having prototypes made, suspending things on or in any number from one to five successive torii gates. One is about 12 inches wide, 12 inches high. Those with five torii gates are about six inches deep. Finding a workable form is an ongoing, intoxicating, incredibly frustrating process. The early ones, the “Passage” series, did not present that level of frustration. Well, that’s not true. They did at first. When I was trying to find a way to suspend them, I was frustrated. I had to bend or bow to the dictates of waking reality, to accept, “They will just have to translate themselves yet one more time—from 4D to 3D to 2-1/2D.” This was a bit of a comeuppance for my grandiosity!

**DN:** There is something precious for me in that compression of space, because it invites me as a viewer to unlock that passage, if you will, from the half-dimension and enter maybe into the fourth dimension.

**JM:** Your description helps. If I could suspend them so that they were three-dimensional instead of two-, I could have two knowns on either side of a passage, the threshold. When they are in 2 ½ dimensions, the viewer is on one side and the other side is unknown.

When I was trying to exhibit them in three dimensions, there was always something visible on the other side. The viewer was on one side and something, even a wall, was on the other side. For me, that was not what they were about for me—or apparently for you.

A **torii** gate is an entrance from secular into sacred space, a threshold that permits the transition between the secular and the sacred, the world of the **kami**, the spirits, the ineffable, the thing that is larger than us. My **torii** needed blank space behind them. Not **blank**. That is the wrong word. There is a lovely concept in Japanese, which I included in my dream book (Mellick, 1996), **Ma**, the present moment potentiating eternally in space. I had to allow a lot of **Ma** around these pieces. They would scream at me if I did not give them enough space.

You asked about my aesthetic. My aesthetic was constantly overridden by an inner authority. I would say, “I want this amount of space around the piece; that is well proportioned.” The piece would look back and say, “I’m squashed.” So, I would have to get a more spacious background. Then I would silently ask, “Is this right?”
It would look back and just say, “Now I’m lost” or “I’m still squashed.” At some point, things would clunk and I would sense, “There. That is it.” We were in tune.

Right now, I am thinking of how my piano tuner tunes my grand. I love to lie underneath the piano and listen to him tune the three strings for each tone. I asked him to explain a few things. One basic he taught me is: “Never tune all three exactly. Tune two to each other and the third infinitesimally close to but different from the other two. The third then moves toward the other two; from this comes resonance, depth. It is the same with these “Passage” pieces. I have to hold the tension that keeps dynamism.

Even when I went to sign the limited edition prints, I realized I could not sign anywhere close to the image because the visual vibration of the image continued—into what the Western eye would call negative space. The signature could not be so far away from the image that the relationship faded away or so close that it became one with the image.

**DN:** I am moved by your description of the three strings in the piano tuning. I am imagining as I am listening to you describe that image that you, the artist, and the artwork are like the first two strings. They have tuned themselves as close to each other as possible. Then the third, the viewer, is close, yet has enough space to experience another frequency that is drawn toward the same frequency as the first two; but is not locked into a pitch that is dictated by either the artist or the artwork.

**JM:** Your image is a gift to me.

**Reflexivity and Jung’s Aesthetic Animation**

At the heart of my conversation with Mellick I reflected on my perception of her images of thresholds and gateways. I remarked:

The many layers I perceive in your work as a viewer, which feel personally intimate, spiritually subtle, yet boldly cross-cultural, make me wonder how do you view the role of these pieces? And do you, as their creator, see yourself as an agent of cross-cultural awareness, stretching your viewers outside of our comfort zone, our own safe homes, to regions where there is a great deal of suffering and despair?

Underlying my questions was the assumption that Mellick intended for her art to be perceived by others as she herself perceived it, erroneously presupposing a two-way, unspoken correspondence between artist and a potential viewer. Perhaps I formed this thought because I imagined such dialogue between the artist and me prior to speaking to Mellick, *as if* taking place amid her creative process, guiding the artist’s aesthetic discernment, ultimately defining the role of the artist as a social change agent and, by extension, the purpose and meaning of the art. Embedded in these assumptions was a viewer-centered projection on Mellick’s work as communicating her own and/or others’ suffering and the need for healing.
Creating and perceiving art are not rational or analytical and thus lend themselves to heightened subjective responses. Jung (1957/1983) discussed a phenomenon he called aesthetic animation, stating that owing to the subjective feelings with which an aesthetic object is created and engaged, artist and viewer, each, interact with the art (to various degree and proportion) in extroverted and introverted manners. Both extroverted (also called empathetic) and introverted (also called abstracting) tendencies govern the relationship between the art object and its creator or viewer. Both are types of projection, in attempt to regulate and contain the complexity of inner attitudes (to be differentiated from mere associations or interpretation), which arise from a felt response to the art.

Though coexisting as mechanism of adaptation and defense, the extroverted and introverted or empathetic and abstracting types of responses to the aesthetic object differ considerably. An empathetic response is inherently trustful, “a readiness to meet the object half way” (Jung, 1957/1983, p. 2352). It is as if the art object is a vessel to contain the subject’s (viewer’s) projections, which imbue the object with life, animate and fill its boundaries with potency and power. The art then reflects the viewer’s autonomous identity, while potentiating change and transformation. Conversely, by abstracting (an introverted response), the viewer guards against the art object taking over through its power to influence. Thus, the introverted attitude would be one in which the viewer selectively refers to subjective feelings elicited by the art object, but not allowing their transformation to occur.

Prior to interviewing Mellick, viewing images of her artwork without insight into the artist’s original creative experience, I had undergone my own relational dynamics with the images, which I brought to our conversation. Jung noted how in the process of engaging the aesthetic object, the art coalesces with the viewer; the viewer merges with the art. In this case, my subjective experience extended into an assumption about the artist’s intentions. I was not satisfied with mere perception, and attempted to enlarge my felt sense beyond my personal experience of the art. Jung articulated the questions, which unconsciously underscored my attempt to generalize my subjective perception as follows: “what does it mean to me or the world? What emerges from this vision in the way of a duty or a task, for me or the world?” (Jung, 1957/1983, p. 2462). In that sense, Mellick’s images were not only art objects to be perceived, but provided an opportunity for a participatory encounter, where I attempted to expand the personal into a universal. Suggesting that it is the artist’s responsibility to interpret her own work, however, I approached our dialogue initially in search of aligning my covert experience with Mellick’s intentions, and sought the validation of my own projections. In so doing, I confined my aesthetic perception (an introverted attitude) and limited (abstracted) my openness to the fluid meaning of her artworks.

Reflecting on my dialogue with Mellick, her refusal to define the purpose of her art or agree or disagree with my projections onto it (and onto her) reopened my encounter with it. At the same time, she continued to probe the nature of my projection (without naming it as such). By saying “exploring, letting a word lead us both, saying to ourselves, “Is that in there? What does that mean?” Mellick differentiated between her original experience, her description of it to me, how I processed and interpreted her art, and the possible value of considering whether my
subjective view resonated with her own experience, stating: “Your questions allow me to consider new things.”

The process of reflexivity in my encounter with Mellick might fall under the term *reflexivity of discomfort*, which acknowledges the tenuous nature of the search for knowledge and the tendency for researchers’ self-referential reflection, one that seeks to preserve an inquirer’s existing position (Pillow, 2003). As a methodological tool, reflexivity is employed to more accurately represent, but also call into question the researcher’s subjective assertions and inevitable bias. Preconceptions typically stem from personal differences, such as gender, culture, ethnicity, sexuality, economic differences, etc., as well as professional interests, ideology, and objectives in pursuing research. Reflexivity is not the same as self-reflection and might inadvertently end up in pouring the data through the researcher’s funnel rather than equally empower the researched in “a mutual negotiation of meaning” (Lather in Pillow, 2003, p. 187).

The first step in confronting researcher-centered reflexivity is to be transparent about the motives and process as well as the limits of reflexivity itself. By employing a dialogical approach to interviewing, the methodological value of the collaboration with participants becomes apparent to all involved. In this case, the collaborative nature of my conversation with Mellick revealed my assumptions about Mellick’s artwork and intentions as an artist, and uncovered the psychological limits and shortcomings of my biased responses to her work.

Moreover, by voicing my implicit assumptions, they became explicit. My projection onto the art was exposed, and was acknowledged as such. In turn, Mellick’s steadfast scrutiny of her original creative experience and the statements she made about the art throughout our correspondence, helped me recognize my need for resolution. I dealt with my hope to alleviate human suffering and my need to sublimate the despair I personally felt while viewing Mellick’s artwork by assuming that her intention was to “heal, or make whole, what was previously fragmented, or ruptured, or in turmoil.” Mellick’s response was: “One is not making something go away or fixing something but allowing something to contain an experience rather than one’s being contained by the experience. . . . The image and the making of the image provide a container for the experience itself.” This, I now understand, was Mellick’s invitation to come out from behind my introverted defenses and presuppositions, and entrust the art object to contain my projections, and thus allowing it to transform me. She encouraged me furthermore to engage the art empathetically by saying:

I hope these pieces allow enough breathing space for each person to bring to them what it is true for each. Only fifty percent of a piece is visible. The other fifty percent is in you. I would not want these pieces to be so declarative that they only make room for my experience. Here again is the theme of a threshold: the threshold lies between us, *between* where we meet, *between* what I make and what you see. What you see in them has absolute authority for you. If what you see in them is healing, that is what is there.
Conclusion

This interview brought about surprises and unanticipated appreciation about Mellick’s creative process and the deeper nature of aesthetic animation; and, uncannily like the enigmatic nature of the Passage series, our conversation and subsequent reflections left me with more about which to wonder. In this sense, Mellick acted as my teacher and guide as well as the focus of my inquiry. Could this recognition be extended to other forms of inquiry? How could researchers consciously empower participants, who might otherwise not be as tenaciously protective of the accuracy of their own experience as Mellick was, to challenge the researcher’s assumptions? By sharing the interview in this article as a mutually reflexive dialogue, we hope to encourage readers to recall their initial engagement with Mellick’s artwork and the interview, to reflect on their own possible presuppositions about the art, the artist’s intentions, and the interviewer’s approach to inquiry. At the same time, readers might consider engaging in reflexivity of discomfort by critically examining their responses to the images and text. Through the lens of Jung’s concept of aesthetic animation: notice how imagery, which we often perceive as universal language, might prompt us to generalize the subjective and even project our bias on the artist, to feel less vulnerable, a defense mechanism that guards against fully feeling what the images stir within us.

I go back to the notion of a “mutual negotiation of meaning” (Lather, cited in Pillow, 2003, p. 187). In the context of qualitative, transpersonal research, it is essential to make implicit assumptions explicit. In the process of an interview, to equally acknowledge what I perceive and how I perceive it may not only be instrumental to uncovering subjective meaning but may also help highlight the compassionate and mutually transformative nature of this approach to inquiry to the extent that it leaves room for others, who encounter it later, to partake in infusing the experience with their own growth enhancing, current meaning. For me, this inquiry has become a passage, to borrow Jill Mellick’s name for her art series, in the communication across the threshold which lies between creative inquirers (researcher and participant). Only then, a fuller range of reflexivity may animate the boundaries between subjective experiences and observations, new awareness and unanticipated discovery.

References


**Notes**

1 The first version was published in 1996 under the title *The Natural Artistry of Dreams* (Conari), and reviewed in 2000 by Lucia Azevedo (*San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal, 19*(3), 13-20). A second version, titled *The Art of Dreaming*, was published in 2001 (Conari).


3 The initial series was titled “Japan Dreaming.” This group later became part of a larger series of 29 works, titled “Passage,” first exhibited in Beirut, Lebanon, in 2012, and more recently at the Ren Brown Collection gallery in Northern California. Mellick explained the title Japan Dreaming as follows: “Australian Aborigines believe in the Dreaming. Dream-time is an infinite time before living memory, a time of eternal, ancestral totemic beings and supernaturals, from which all phenomena and life derive. Individuals exist eternally in the Dreaming, before and after their human lives; connection to all things in nature is spiritual; and the land or country to which the people belong is believed to provide a harmonious framework for experience, a link between the people and the Dreaming. *Dreaming*, as used in the title, is intended to carry both Aboriginal and Western meanings” (2011, p. 108).

4 In 2015-2016, I served as guest editor of a special section on arts and consciousness for the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies (IJTS)*. A search for artist-scholars whose work would fit the theme (see Netzer, 2015) led me to Jill Mellick’s mixed-media series “Passage.”

5 A Japanese philosophical perspective that sees beauty in what is impermanent, simple, in process, understated, incomplete, and imperfect.

6 The author has previously presented on the topic of Jung’s aesthetic animation and Pillow’s reflexivity of discomfort at the third international Transpersonal Research Colloquium, Prague, Czech Republic, October 2, 2017.
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The Artist

Jill Mellick, Ph.D., is a Jungian psychologist, expressive arts therapist, writer, researcher, and artist in private practice in Palo Alto, California. An Australian, she is the author of many publications including Coming Home to Myself (with Marion Woodman), The Art of Dreaming, The Natural Artistry of Dreams, and The Worlds of P’otsunu (with Jeanne Shutes). Her poetry has been published in various journals. A Full Professor and Founding Director of the Creative Expression program in the masters and doctoral degrees for 20 years, she is now Professor Emerita at Sofia University. A multimedia artist and photographer, she travels widely, often to Japan, New Mexico, Greece, and Australia, with a special focus on the role of indigenous arts in psychospiritual healing, development, and expression. The Stiftung der Werke von C. G. Jung invited her to contribute a chapter on Jung’s art methods in The Red Book for a catalogue of Jung’s unpublished art (W.W. Norton, 2017); her discoveries of Jung’s art materials and insights into his creative processes will be published in The Red Book Hours (in process).

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