

Artistically Speaking: Women's Roles in Contemporary Art & Society

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Is Art Ritual/Is Ritual Art?

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Excerpt from the essay

This emphasis on achievement of “flow” through both high levels of skill, and of challenge, is commonly characteristic of access to altered states of consciousness by shamans. And, the shaman achieves this mental state through enactment of various forms of ritual. Winkelman notes that the shaman utilizes ritual—“formalized behavior that has communication and social signaling functions...” both to activate alternate states of consciousness as well as to “activate information exchanges from neurological through conceptual levels...[synchronizing] the individual with the group...” This becomes possible because “the human nervous system evolved within a context that required a social interdependency.” Winkelman theorizes that there are both internal and external-social effects of ritualized behaviors consciously engaged in by shamans that intensify “the human capacity for emotional self-moderation based on the symbiotic caregiver-child relation that derives from the mammalian attachment dynamic that provide the basis for emotional life” (Winkelman, 206).

Anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake’s research pushes Winkelman’s observation further when she suggests that the commonplace caretaking and care-receiving interaction between mother and infant, which involves imitating and “play acting,” is the source of aesthetic imagination, and that strong similarities can be drawn between art and ritual that are based on the human developmental stage “in infants of imitation and pretense [pretending].” Dissanayake asserts that this childish “imitation and pretense” is later reenacted by adults in the deployment of ritual, and is also frequently characteristic of the ways “the arts present imaginative representations...” Dissanayake’s proposal that the presence of imitation and pretense in art has a ritualized basis, originating in early stages of human development, and emerging much later, in adulthood, through manifestation in rituals of all kinds (Dissanayake 2015, 78).

This dynamic of accessing remote, more primitive areas of the brain, and the reemergence into both ritual and art, of earlier stages of human development, is especially perceivable in the creative process and finished art works of Dana Donaty. Donaty reports that her process is both unconscious and conscious. It is “like automatic writing,” but it also involves consciously engaging the human characteristic of pareidolia (seeing patterns in randomness) described by Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci.

Leonardo famously noted that “if you look at any walls spotted with various stains ... you may be able to see in it a resemblance to various different landscapes...figures in quick movement, and strange expressions of faces, and outlandish costumes” (Vinci 2014).ix

Donaty’s pareidolia-induced works also exhibit a high level of play. Play is often described as “the work of children,” which resonates with Dissanayake’s identification of infants’ uses of imitation and pretense in self-development, and the emergence of these activities as adult processes of imagination later in life...play as the root basis of both ritual and art.

Donaty’s works in *Artistically Speaking* emerge consciously from detritus-blotches spattered randomly while creating paintings. Donaty characterizes the resulting paintings as the “children” “born” from materials (paint droplets, smears on palette liners, water used to clean brushes, etc.), randomly and unconsciously discarded while creating the “parent” work.

In the finished “child” paintings, colorful, high-spirited creatures emerge from random paint splotches, cavorting around photo-realistic depictions of human hands and feet in action doing, the artist asserts, “things that adults do, or tell us to do.” Donaty’s “children” (the exuberant creatures) dance around grown up hands holding cocktails, or grown up feet dressed “to go out” (the adult images are, of course, portrayed as engaged in forms of “adult play”). Donaty says about this work that it allows her to consciously explore pareidolia, while materializing and honoring pleasurable memory, as well as her family’s values of “waste not want not” taught by her Depression era father. She explains: “My process by design allows me to interact with the unexpected. There are at least two protagonists in the works: randomness and planned execution. The coexistence is how they challenge each other. The human elements are the planned execution, and the creatures are what emerges from randomness” through conscious mining of pareidolia.

Ellen Dissanayake has also asserted that ritual makes what would otherwise be commonplace, “special” by its use or display in situations where one would not normally find them. Ritual “...is characterized...by unusual behavior that sets it off from the ordinary or everyday. Time, space, activity, dress, paraphernalia are all made special or extraordinary, and so we can speak of ritual time, ritual space, ritual activity, ritual dress, ritual paraphernalia” (Dissanayake 2005, 68-69).



Figure 2: Dana Donaty. *Saturday Night*, 2015 Acrylic on Canvas. 48” x 80”



Figure 3: Photo of canvas on floor and palette liners next to finished painting