



Making Images and Healing Soul

By Michael Grosso

Abstract

The processes of making images – making paintings – are experiments in soulmaking. In this article I share some of my processes and awarenesses in my paintings.

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Psychologist C.G. Jung had much to say about images and the soul, especially a special category of *archetypal* images, important for *individuation* or soul healing. Cezanne called his paintings “experiments.” For me, making images – making paintings – are experiments in soulmaking. (More on this in my book, *Soulmaking: Uncommon Paths to Self-Understanding*.)

We are in fact continuously constructing our image of the world and revising it, most of the time, subliminally. My experience is that making images has a life – enhancing impact. When I stop painting, I start to feel out of sorts. Once back into it, my mood becomes sanguine, my senses more alert and receptive.

Once at work, the image starts to appear and at a certain point seems to acquire a life of its own. I’m drawn into making it visible. I have to keep working until the image coalesces – to my satisfaction. The best statement I know about the process is from Picasso: “A painting is the sum of its destructions.”

For Jung, our entire existence is made of images, scenes, perspectives. During every waking moment, we’re immersed in some image of sense, memory, imagination, often interwoven. It’s impossible to escape the stream of mental imagery that constitutes our unique perspective on our moment to moment existence – we do, of course, “escape” in periodic dreamless sleep. Even as we analyze and objectify our own experience, we create new and more complex images. Since there is no way out of our image world, I call myself, metaphysically, an imagist – a kind of idealist.

We all have different images of the world. Each of us is distinct from everybody else’s world-image, although sometimes we coast together in shared image-worlds and have shared experiences. Now and then the images of one mind spills out of its bodily envelope and interacts directly with distant minds. Images get interesting, even fascinating, when they touch on the great archetypal themes of life, like love, art, death, self, God, purpose, hero, family, friendship, and so on.

As far as our personal image of life in general, what we see is often not coherent, without shape or direction – not very upbeat, or even too meaningful. We’re living in strange times. We

find ourselves in a world of infinite information but with little instruction on how to shape ourselves or form a worldview. Traditional religion might help some. Science provides all kinds of possible tools. But living in the 21st century, consensus in every domain is lacking; to make matters worse, in an age of blatant trumpery, the very idea of truth is in crisis.

With new information constantly forcing us to revise our views of everything, modernity demands that we cobble together our own worldview, our own map of what we are and where we are going. Given that so much is in transition, we have to improvise our lives. The difficulties of doing this are at the root of much malaise. It's hard just surviving economically, but to have your cultural identity thrown under a bus while the planet itself is convulsing with catastrophic weather, poses some challenges.

I believe we can use art to alleviate the ills of the spirit. All forms of art are grist for this mill. Art is good for soul – our intimate consciousness – which has lost touch with images that *animate* our being. Fighting off this deadness of soul may explain the addiction to movies, sports, video games, the internet, etc., etc.

Caring for the soul (*psycho-therapeia*), however, activates creative energy. The arts are ways of tuning into the energies we identify as aesthetic, magical, or contemplative. The pleasure of art is a kind of ecstasy, which is simply the result of being temporarily dissociated from everything – except your artwork.

To make this concrete, here's how I draw and paint. A venture into the aesthetic, it's also an attempt at *therapeia* of my *psyche*. In making a painting, I create an image; that is, I make my soul (which is made of images); I feel and see the new image emerge before my eyes. Eye, hand, and feet join in each brush stroke, which acts as a pulsation from the psyche, gradually informing the pictorial space on the canvas.

I began to draw before I learned how to write, and never fully stopped making some kind of art. During a long lull around 1995, strange paintings kept appearing in my dreams. I woke up and thought, "*That was hatched in my psyche!*" Mark Twain once wrote that in our dream life, each of us is a great artist. The trick of course is how to enlist the partnership of our dream artist in our waking life.

I decided to build a studio, and got back into painting, this time with a new attitude. I had enough of minimalism and declared myself a maximalist. I was looking for ways of connecting with Mark Twain's dream artist that I knew was inside me. So I developed a method of painting – of making images. I've had shows and have sold paintings. But neither have ever been a prime interest of mine. Instead, painting has become my spiritual practice, what the Indians, native and Asian, call 'vision quest' or *sadhana*. I had no interest in the moneyed 'art world,' which Georgia O'Keefe, even in a less corrupt time, called a "pig sty." My need was not for money but for soul.

Painting – making images – is a unique pleasure – a species of spiritual pleasure, which includes unmistakably erotic sensations. Of course, it's not about this all the time; you do have to clean your brushes and stare blankly at what you've made.

I've worked out my own method of painting, based on a theory that links painting to psychical research. A painting is a materialization of the artist's imagination, achieved by manipulation of pigment and canvas. However, there are cases of materialization in the fully dramatic paranormal sense, for example, Dr. Jule Eisenbud's boozy patient who could project mental images directly on to Polaroid film or the case of Eva C. who had the ability to materialize two dimensional figures (usually faces) that were repeatedly photographed, as you can learn from the massively documented studies of the Baron von Schrenck Notzing.

But back to my mundane studio putterings. I compare image making to the Babylonian genesis story of Marduk and Tiamat, perhaps the oldest creation myth. Tiamat is primordial chaos; Marduk, the leading god in the Babylonian pantheon, creates the world out of Tiamat. Each of us has a Marduk and a Tiamat: we have to form our lives from the chaos of possibilities that life or our art form provide. We create and recreate our world-image constantly. Art is a way

of reminding ourselves that we are free to have the last say in how we interpret the meaning of our experience.

But back to the image on the canvas. It begins to materialize and I won't know when it's complete until I see it. My method is to be fluid about following chance associations and slight automatism – whatever agitates the visual image and lets me see where it wants to go. I always have a cloth with turpentine nearby, so I can wipe clean whatever impulsive gesture with the brush I decide I don't like.

I've noticed that it's tempting to be satisfied with something done reasonably well. But I mistrust that way of closing down the dialogue between me and what might be beyond me.

My first move is to set up canvas on stretchers, so I can create the initial chaos of possibilities. I proceed to get my sketch or seed idea down as quickly and spontaneously as possible, even arbitrarily, painting at first with thin washes, blocking in the contrasts, lights and darks, textures, colors, and hatchings – done with a certain careless enthusiasm.

Now, an inchoate, slapdash world sits before me. After the first rush, I contemplate what has appeared – the first concrete materialization. I may be moved to go on painting or what I just did may discourage me from going on. It may seem that I missed by a long shot. This part of soul-making can be the most difficult, the most painful.

You make the investment of time, energy, material, and produce a first draft of a painting, and the little voice inside says, "It's no good." You can't see your way forward, and you can't imagine how what you've done can be salvaged; at that moment. I've known it often. You feel like a hopeless failure. It's easy to give up at this stage of the game.

Here is an example of this process. Figure 1 is a photo of me sitting on a rock overlooking the Grand Canyon. I was tripping on LSD. The photograph was by my girlfriend (whom I inserted in the painting.) I had forgotten about the photo and not looked at it for years. When I did early this month, I remembered the canyon, an unforgettable light show that no artist could capture. Still, I decided to do a painting of the photo; a way to celebrate a wonderful memory.

Figure 1. Photo of myself looking into the Grand Canyon



Maybe a month passed before I started work on my idea. I had the canvas on an easel with my oil paints, but was too busy with other matters and not ready to surrender myself to painting. As the days passed I felt a bit more prickly about things in general, edgy and captious, which I knew was because I wanted to paint. When I did finally start my mood shifted and high spirits returned. See Figure 2.

Figure 2. First painting



Making an image that fails to crystallize at the first attempt is like living, and echoes a common experience in which we feel defeated by an obstacle. It's good to memorize that feeling of futility. What I've learned from experience is that if I persist, breakthrough eventually comes, and with it the peculiar pleasure I've mentioned. It's then I recall a saying of Leonardo da Vinci: "Everything yields to effort."

If I use a photograph in a painting, it may be just for some detail. From this photo I got the basic image of a figure overlooking a canyon. I was able quickly to get a sense of the dominant lines of the composition. I worked on what you can see until I covered the canvas. But then I hit a snag; I didn't want to copy all the rock formations, just evoke a dominant feeling.

I tried, but nothing grabbed me. I decided to do something I never do – scrap what I had done. But I changed my mind. I decided to abandon any pretense of realism and convert what I had done into a painting where the real and the surreal are juxtaposed. The painting becomes a portrait of my psyche, not of a scene that can be photographed.

Figure 3. is the result. The photograph was a point of departure for constructing an image that satisfied my imagination. I see some things I still need to do, minor but important. One possibility is to heighten the contrasts and change it to a quasi-night-scene. The forms in the original image were a means to draw out something inside me, which I think is what art is about. But drawing them out, they need to be reshaped. That's where the art comes in. But most of all an artist has to rely on imagination – the ultimate psychedelic.

Figure 3. Second painting



Measurement: 4 x 3 feet

Figure 4. Third painting



So, to round this off, we honor Tiamat as the sower of creative chaos. But Marduk must come in as the active shaping principle, without which, we have no world and no self to enjoy the world, just a lot chaos thrashing clumsily about. Marduk has to execute – materialize – the world-image.

My own way of painting is primitive: I look hard at what I've done; then I get rid of what I don't like and play up and elaborate what I do like. Pause and repeat. Keep it up until the moment it all seems to coalesce – then I stop. Until it starts again.

In this method I've evolved, I might feel something I thought was great and sacrosanct *has to go*; in a stroke, I transform the work. What a rush! There's never a time when Marduk becomes useless. And there is never a time when the creative chaos of Tiamat may not blow your mind.

Every painting relives the genesis story, and is a way of making soul. What I make in art is in spirit transposed to making my life. In general, any art form that works with chaos has the potential to become a template for an art of life. Making art – making images – is good for the health of the soul. Art can be a profession, a way to make money, fame, and status – or it can be a method of soul-making.

Michael Grosso, PhD, is an independent scholar and artist. He studied classics and got his doctorate in philosophy from Columbia University. Current interests include consciousness studies and extreme psychophysical phenomena.

Books: The Final Choice: Death or Transcendence? (2018)

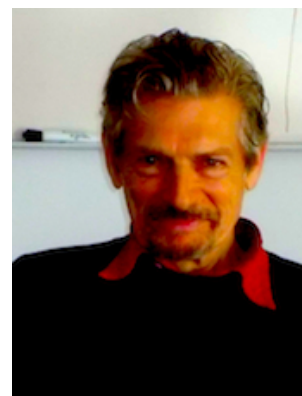
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