Becoming a Gem: The Effects of Cultural Communication on the Transformation of a Rough Stone into a Gem

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ABSTRACT

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For this thesis, I used practice-led research methods and storytelling to record and explain artwork development during studio practice. I demonstrate how as an artist, my presence in a new place of residence influences my story. In addition, I have analyzed my reflections on my experiences from a research standpoint. From an artistic angle, I look at how a raw stone becomes an art object, and from a research perspective, I examine how knowledge is obtained and documented. I also explore the unspoken layers of making artwork and how the artist communicates his/her emotions while creating art. To ensure that practice-led research can be smoothly incorporated into an artistic activity, I accentuate the importance of striking a balance between intuition and organization within a creative project. Since I am also an artist (in addition to a researcher), I employ concept mapping in this approach in order to scrutinize how various elements are affected or influenced at each point of my study.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DEDICATION

In memory of my mother

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Becoming a Gem: The Effects of Cultural Communication on the Transformation of a Rough Stone into a Gem

"Every art[work] communicates because it expresses. It enables us to share vividly and deeply in meanings…For communication is not announcing things…Communication is the process of creating participation, of making common what had been isolated and singular…the conveyance of meaning gives body and definiteness to the experience of the one who utters as well as to that of those who listen."

– John Dewey, Art as Experience, p. 253.

The statements made by the philosopher and psychologist John Dewey (1934/2005) about the importance of art as a link for sharing meaning through experience is still meaningful in the contemporary context. Understanding and sharing intentions through art can be a different experience for everyone, depending on where they live, their beliefs, and their cultures. Meanwhile, immigrants with backgrounds in art try to present their own impressions using their own creative language as they arrive in a foreign country and adapt to different cultures and perspectives.

As this discussion of my study will demonstrate, creating artwork and practice-led (i.e., experiential) research are inextricably linked and have proven to be fertile ground for personal and creative growth. I researched producing artwork based on practice in my studio as an artist, examined and interpreted the experience as a researcher, and applied and reflected on the results from a newcomer and teacher's viewpoint through rigorous documentation and reflection. My experiences motivated me to make concrete links between art-making and practice-led learning

during the project. The tools of practice-led study, I discovered, have the potential to improve critical thinking and self-awareness while also encouraging creative and educational development.

As an artist, I have been thinking about how the visual experience of being in a new country could have influenced my art development after living abroad and studying overt and covert environmental effects like the connection between the creation of an artwork and the emergence of hidden emotions about my artwork. Every artist, including myself, is empowered by life experiences to adopt a new pose for renewal and transformation. The visual arts can be a method of inquiry based on artists' theories, practices, and contexts (Sullivan, 2010). In this case, I was driven to look into my own art-making experience—sculpting in precious stones—and personal life in order to learn more and gather first-hand information. Through sharing my experiences in creating a piece of art, I hope to make the theoretical logic of my study more accessible to readers. This strategy is in line with my conviction that theory can be deduced from action.

As a result of my research and practice, I have become more aware and knowledgeable of the practice-led research tools that are propelling studio practice in academia. In my research, I aim to assess the relevance and efficacy of tools of documentation and reflection through first-hand engagement in creating a work of art based on experience. In the chapters that follow, I delve into the background of the inquiry and the studio work that I did in greater depth. I then contextualize the research by citing related scholars' findings on studio-based inquiry, visual arts as research, and other relevant topics. Afterward, having set the stage for my project in an in-depth and visual manner, I describe comparisons of how it unfolded and progressed, both in terms of the creative process and data analysis. Finally, I connect my experiences and research

results to different art creation contexts in the form of two main suggestions, which are intertwined and often mutually beneficial.

Background of the Research and the Research Questions

Upon reflection, I can trace my study path back to my first experience of creating artwork. I became acquainted with environmental elements and animals due to my teaching background in painting and drawing, primarily from nature. On the other hand, because Iran is an ancient country with a thousand-year history of civilization, I often visited historical sites and museums containing Iranian antiquities. I became familiar with the design and sculpture of my Iranian forefathers. My familiarity with design and interest in ancient Iranian art led me to use historical forms in modern art. I began working on precious or semi-precious stones after being inspired by images used in ancient sculpture or pottery and combining them with contemporary jewelry and sculpture. My experience of more than a decade of working on precious stones and making functional ornamental sculptures in the form of jewelry, mostly inspired by Iran's ancient culture, has shaped my involvement with Iranian cultural and environmental symbols (for example, see Figure 1).

After immigrating to Canada, living among its people, perceiving its nature, and understanding the environmental aspects and cultural identities of the region where I live, I tried to use these features in a reflective way in my final work of art, and also as a form of contemplation. One of Canada's hallmarks is each region's pristine nature and fauna. Since the very first days of my arrival in this country, Canada's beautiful natural settings and wild animals, and the symbols that represent them, have given me a new experience with a keen visual sense and a curious perspective.

Figure 1: Examples of my Previous Works

For this study, I used my art (precious stone sculpting) as a communication medium to explore the ideas and effects of environmental elements or cultural symbols, drawing on my recent experiences creating artwork in, and my first-hand impressions of Canada. This country has inspired me to create art from a different angle. I also looked into the possibility of combining visual elements from my previous works (such as Zoroastrian symbols) with Canada's environmental features in order to produce a work of art that could incorporate both cultural and ecological elements as well as emphasise the artist's work as an intercultural link.

In particular, I had to ask myself: How do I understand my new feelings, and how do I apply them to my work? I used my results from studying the use of documentation and reflection techniques to produce practice-led artwork. Subsequently, I began to wonder: How can intercultural interactions contribute to my personal/professional development and creation of art? These two questions lie at the heart of my academic/artistic research for this project. Since my previous works have been influenced by Iran's ancient culture—especially Zoroastrian philosophy—producing a work of art through activities based on previous experiences, combined with the effects of the new environment, has given me a better understanding and ability to articulate my artistic process in this research.

In addition, I have gained a deeper understanding and am better able to describe the usage of experience-based documentation and reflection resources in various learning environments. My self-awareness as a newcomer and artist has greatly increased due to discovering and using these resources. I was also able to identify the characteristics, pros and cons, and applications of my research; this information will help me communicate and use this artwork to construct a representation that combines Zoroastrianism's philosophical perspective with my new visual experience.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Before starting any studio activity, I tried to identify artists or researchers in order to fully reflect on my artistic and research goals. In this regard, Wilson's (1997) article, "The second search: Metaphor, dimensions of meaning, and research topics in art education," influenced me; it notes that the process of studying a topic entails "re-search[ing]…search[ing] again, [and] tak[ing] a closer second look" (p. 2). Consequently, I reasoned that "re-search" would allow me to explore the historical context of my previous works. Because of this inspiration, I reviewed papers from both historical and academic angles. For my new field of practice, I planned to examine, re-search, and analyze historical-artistic Persian art, concentrating on Zoroastrianism and symbolism of the time. I decided to use research to create new artwork based on my experiences living in Canada. In the first section of this thesis, I address Zoroastrianism from a symbolic perspective (which I outline below) by investigating books or articles on Persian history. In the second section, I concentrate on scholarly papers that mention practice-led studies or artists who have worked on this theme.

The Role of Symbols in Our Understanding

I began my research by reading articles and books about symbols and signs, especially the usage of symbols in ancient Iran. Symbols are the dominant forces that settle in the artist's soul and flow into his/her work affecting all that he/she produces. Artists often present messages with several layers of meaning in the same work that the viewer must interpret one after another. Symbols also shape our understanding of our own identities, and although symbolic processes do not affect our lives deterministically, they influence our identities more than we realize. Without question, myths, legends, and narrations derived from religious contexts have served as a

foundation for images and symbols in past artwork, in which the values of people from different historical eras can be seen.

According to Jung (1916/2002), the artist is inspired by their heritage or subconscious, rather than by a strictly verifiable source. The key to grasping the collective unconscious and recognizing works of art is to examine their symbolic language. The majority of symbols can be found in religion, mysticism, and art. Similarly, Pakbaz (2020) claimed that art, as a culture, represents human values and attitudes toward life, as well as human identities throughout history. To the degree that all religious values are manifested in art, art and artistic development have often been a cornerstone of every faith.

After studying the perspectives of Jung (1915) and Pakbaz (2020), I moved on to historians' views on the usage of symbols in Persian history, especially in ancient Iran. According to Afzal-Toosi and Hasan-Poor (2012), as a cultural term, "art" reflects human thoughts and identity. The growth of art in the context of religious beliefs (as one of the most potent factors shaping Iranian identity) and the evolution of artistic symbols (which has continued with religious, cultural, and social functions in different eras) demonstrate the two-way relationship of these components in creating and cultivating infrastructure; it has played a unique, visual-cultural role in Iranian society and in Iranians' cultural integration. Pope and Ackerman (1938/1967) argued that both philosophies and religions have used symbolism throughout history, and that all of them have employed symbolic language and forms, as publishing in a more appealing symbolic way will convey ideas that cannot be seen in other ways.

Likewise, Vermaseren (1960), agreed that a symbol acquires and develops multiple meanings and ideas during its ongoing use. Further, it is important to go back in time while

7

researching ethnic characters. André Godard (1965), another historian, shared this stance in his article, "The Art of Iran," claiming that representations produced in the past were based on the concept and inner nature of objects and phenomena, rather than on their physical presence. These representations have been used to convey fears and dreams, as well as to demonstrate the use of natural forces in the relentless, terrible struggle of life.

Next, I briefly review Zoroastrian philosophy and interpretations of its environmental signs in some published books and papers that I examined in order to better understand the signs and symbols that have appeared in my previous works. In some ways, these have guided the evolution of the final work of art produced for my thesis concerning nature and culture.

Zoroastrianism and Nature

The term "Zoroastrianism" can be traced to its supposed founder, "a prophetic figure named Zarathushtra (Zoroastres in the Greek sources), whose life details remain a matter of debate. Followers of the faith call themselves 'Mazda-worshippers,' and refer to the religion itself simply as 'the Good Religion.' He is believed to have lived anytime from 1800 to 600 BCE and anywhere from western Iran to present-day Kazakhstan" (Foltz & Saadi-Nejad, 2007, p. 417). This faith's profound thoughts have instilled symbols in the lives of its adherents, which are mirrored in works of art. Although the secret meanings behind the presence of these symbols have been overlooked over the years—they no longer have the sanctity and significance they once held for modern humans—an accurate interpretation of their meanings generates insight into Iranian religious and visual symbolism. Zoroastrianism introduced specific ideas into people's beliefs, and of course, into the art of the time. I will mention some symbols used in Zoroastrian illustrations based on the writings of Vermaseren (1960), Ghirshman (1989), Allan (1999), Hall (2018), and Foltz and Saadi-Nejad (2007).

According to Foltz and Saadi-Nejad (2007):

Zoroastrians believe that the world is originally good in that it was created in proper order and harmony by a beneficent supreme deity, Ahura Mazda (literally "Lord Wisdom"). As such, nature serves as a proof for the existence of the Divine Creator, Ahura Mazda. Humans are meant to see nature as a source of joy, and the material world as something to be perfected, not escaped. Indeed, Zoroastrianism would appear to be the earliest example of a worldview in which good and bad are seen as absolutes, free of the contextual relativities and nuances that typically characterize morality in other ancient societies. Zoroastrian ethics consist of freely choosing that which is good, and rejecting that which is not (p. 418).

According to Zoroastrianism, beauty is associated with **light** because light is an inherent part of the celestial personality and is in constant conflict with the devilish darkness. The **sun** is associated with **lions** and **horned animals**. The sun is portrayed by the **goat**, as well as the multi-feathered flower depicted between its horns. **Birds**, **pigeons**, and **roosters**, which are the pinnacles of believers' self-awareness, are also thought to be sun-dependent (Vermaseren, 1960).

Good character is symbolized by the **bull**, the system is illustrated by **fire**, and eternal life and immortality are represented by **plants**. Further, the **palm tree** represents the moon, while **cypress** and **pine trees** denote the sun. Of the elements, **flames**, as well as **red, yellow**, and **gold** are attributed to the sun, which has always been regarded as a sign of everlasting life, majesty, glory, and kingship, to the point that kings' crowns have always included a ray of light or wings (Ghirshman, 1989). The **wing** refers to flight and is not easily obtained in any tradition, but rather is acquired at the expense of occult teachings and self-cultivation. In Eastern civilization, **rams, sheep**, **lambs**, and **ewes** are extremely valuable, and these animals are sun signs, as well

as symbols of modesty, honor, and courage (Allan et al., 1999). Among birds, the **eagle** has been associated with the gods of heaven and earth (Hall, 2018).

Zoroastrian Moral Philosophy

According to Afzal-Toosi and Hasan-Poor (2012), the Zoroastrians gave God the name Ahuramazda, which means "wise Lord." Wisdom is his most prominent attribute, as the name suggests. The most beautiful Ormazd (Ahuramazda) forms are the shape of the sun in the sky and the magnificent embodiment of the earth. His expressions are also associated with natural elements, such as a star-studded garment. Zoroaster believed that the powers of good and evil were engaged in a grueling war over earth, as well as in the hearts of human beings. According to this faith's teachings, the natural world is a mixture of good and evil, black and white, darkness and light, and humans are trapped in the grip of pain, unhappiness, and persecution throughout their lives (Allan et al., 1999). In sum, Zoroastrianism teaches "that your good thoughts, good deeds and good words alone will be your intercessors. Nothing more will be wanted. They alone will serve you as a safe pilot to the harbor of heaven, as a safe guide to the gates of paradise" (Hanson, 1894, p. 456). As a result, Zoroastrian moral philosophy can be considered as an artistic theme for the study's subsequent stages, particularly the final art-making process.

Practice-led Research in Academia

According to Sullivan (2010), "art practice has long been a critical and creative means of inquiry that encourages new ways to think about what it is to be human within the uncertain worlds within which we live" (p. 4). Further, if a central aim "of research is to increase awareness of ourselves and the world we live in, then it seems plausible to argue that

understanding involves investigating issues that have personal and public relevance" (Sullivan, 2010, p. 97). Through the works of artists and researchers whose activities are similar to mine, I studied the use of visual arts research in the academy. I looked at artists who use written and visual resources outside of their artistic output to construe their work via analysis, which encouraged me to explore the thoughts of art critics and theorists for meaning. While I did not have an artist-researcher close at hand to consult who has worked to integrate ancient culture with contemporary elements, I reviewed two unrelated papers on art with an academic perspective that fit the general purpose of my thesis: to use practice-led research.

Kathleen Vaughan, a Concordia University professor and art education researcher who incorporates collage with psychological concepts, described her own art-making process as "the role of art as research and research as art less as creating new knowledge and more as calling forth, pulling together and arranging the multiplicities of knowledges embedded within" (Vaughan, 2009, p. 170). Her article "Mariposa: The Story of New Work of Research/Creation, Taking Shape, Taking Flight" describes and articulates her collage method. Vaughan developed an epistemological, practice-led research approach that aesthetically examines her collage practice through reflective and personal narrative inquiry. For her articulation of practice-led techniques, I considered her article to be a helpful resource.

As my studio work progressed, I looked at the work of a variety of other artists who were able to help me further focus on my research and contextualize myself in relation to my project's goals. My mind became more open to practice-led learning issues in the artwork of other artists as I strove to recognize and record my own process. In a similar vein, author and researcher Jane Goodall (2009) explored how her realistic research on storytelling can affect the overall process of a work and the meanings generated. She described her innovative thinking, processes, and

results. She asserted that "you have to just try everything: reinvestigate what you have about you and push your invention in every possible direction till you can find something that will work to release the free-running energies that every reader takes for granted and requires as an incentive for continuing to turn the pages" (Goodall, 2009, p. 202). According to her three stories, "The Visitor," "The Walker," and "The Calling," creative arts research is effective in calibrating awareness of the psychological shifts required to keep a work alive and to manage energy effectively. Moreover, research cannot save a person, but it can be helpful since it plays a role in the majority of inventions (p. 207). Goodall's practice-led research offers a unique perspective on the role of content and the impact of characters in the creation of artwork, as well as in guiding creative processes. Her research—like mine, in which content is a major factor—guided my own.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

Research Method

For the method, I combined aspects of in-documented, reflective, studio practice with practice-led research methodology and narrative inquiry. I conducted practice-led research, which is creative work combined with creative practice (Smith & Dean, 2009). In my investigation, the creative practice emerged from making art, which includes careful reflection and extensive documentation. Some arts-based literature uses "practice-based research" to describe a similar kind of inquiry that differs from practice-led research. I use "practice-led research" to indicate that my artwork and practice form the foundation of my inquiry.

According to Candy (2006), research is practice-led if it primarily leads to new understandings of practice. Practice-based learning is concerned with the nature of practice, focuses on its essence, and produces new knowledge that has operational and organizational implications for that practice. This kind of research chiefly aims to raise awareness about practice or knowledge within it. New principles and methods in the creation of original information have emerged due to this type of research. Scrivener (2002) maintained that practice-based research seeks to create culturally novel apprehensions that are not only novel for the maker of an artifact, but for individual observers as well; this is what separates the researcher from the practitioner.

I examined my creative practice using a practice-led approach through documentation and reflection. Practice-led study is a distinct type of visual arts research (Sullivan, 2010) because the creative process is the primary impetus for the research (p. 78). Since "Making is

conceived to be the guiding force behind the study" (Mäkelä & Routarinne, 2006, p. 22), my thesis supports the theory of practice-led research, according to which practice has an important role. The approved research role of data collection is often conceptualized as data creation in practice-led research (Sullivan, 2010, p. 78), and arts-based learning is a form of experiential education that incorporates the arts to explore different ways of understanding oneself, one's life, others in the world and one's place in it (Eisner, 2008).

My data collection process encompassed both documentation and reflection. Data are produced as part of the art-making, reflection, and documentation processes (Nimkulrat, 2007). Visuals and texts that have been recorded may be used to expand the analysis method as they are commented on (Nimkulrat, 2007), which I will review in detail in the analysis. I gathered and generated data in several ways/areas for my project, such as through observation and visualization, photography, sketching, consulting journal articles, and examining the referenced texts. Reflecting after an action is the most common first step to improving one's skills. Although every artist may know vaguely and schematically what they want to make, they do not know what they is going to create until they do so (Reid, 1983, p. 38). In the unexpected process of making, he/she learns. As a result, reflective art-making can be used to discern what is going on in an individual artist's thought process and understanding of the world around him/her.

When a concrete experience is enriched by thought, given meaning by thinking, and transformed by action, the new experience produced is richer, wider, deeper, and helps to deepen learning and adapt it to new situations (Kolb & Kolb, 2010). We think back on what we have done in order to ascertain how our knowing-in-action could have led to an unintended outcome (Schön, 1987). Sullivan (2010, p. 51) defined "reflexivity" in practice-led research as a situation where the artist intuitively adopts the researcher's dual positions and studies; the process shifts

all perspectives. Thus, reflection plays an essential role in the cycle since it works in tandem with the other elements of concrete experience, observation (which is put together with reflection), abstract idea formation, and interpretations of novel situations.

Greene (1995) claimed that being exposed to the arts can stimulate one's imagination and help one to imagine multiple alternate realities. Likewise, Lawrence (2012, p. 471) argued that the arts could change individual worldviews and ultimately transform societies when perceived collectively. As a result, one would expect art-related programs to have a lot of potential for producing new ideas and broadening artists' perspectives.

I also used autoethnography, a narrative-related approach in which I wrote and documented the feelings I had at each point in my journey. Material produced via this technique "is written [down] and recorded by the individuals who are the subject of the study" (Ellis, 2004; Muncey, 2010). Muncey (2010) described autoethnography as entailing multiple levels of consciousness (e.g., the vulnerable self, the coherent self, etc.), critiquing the self in social contexts, subverting dominant discourses, and evocative capacity. These aspects reveal an author's personal narrative, as well as the broader cultural significance of an individual's story. As pedagogic stimuli, these personal narratives might throw more light on the hidden layers of artists' lives through the art creation process.

Research Design

I integrated several components of my studio practice experiences as an Iranian artist in Canadian society, and obtained knowledge by observing and studying my previous works, the philosophy behind my works, and my daily life in my new residence. My research demonstrates

how this process allowed me to better understand the role of cultural communication and artistic observation in creating art.

The first step of my method involved data collection, which I carried out according to Gray and Malins' (2016) approach, introduced in their book, "Visualizing Research: A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design."

➢ **Observation**: In the first step, I closely observed my environment and previous works, and accurately recorded my activities to capture data relevant to the project.

➢ **Visualization**: In the next step, I made my ideas visible through a range of note-taking and voice recording techniques to explore project issues and/or present findings.

➢ **Photography**: Next, I captured and produced images of the objects or environment and provided evidence of significant features related to the project.

➢ **Sketchbook**: In this step, I created a portable book tracing the development of ideas over time and my subsequent reflection and analysis. This included a range of visuals, notes, and other contextual references.

After gathering the above information, I completed the following steps:

➢ **Review**: I researched the philosophical background of my prior works, including concepts of Zoroastrian and ancient symbols.

➢ **Exercise and Composition**: I sketched the symbols from scenes of Canada's nature that I have photographed and chose the best composition for the final performance.

➢ **Performance**: I completed the final work on the stone according to the sketches.

➢ **Storytelling**: I narratively documented the stages of creating a work of art and the feelings I had in certain phases.

Research Process

In mid-July of 2019, I arrived in Canada. My appearance as a newcomer and artist drew me into the surroundings and everything new to me. To get to my destination, I booked a taxi and exchanged some of my money to Canadian dollars while waiting for a taxi at the airport. After receiving the money, I noticed the images on the coins, which depicted various animals including an adult polar bear, a caribou, a loon, and a beaver (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Canadian Coins

Because of these images I became more curious as I had previously worked on drawing animals, predominantly mythical animals from ancient Iran (Figure 3). These coins invited me into their world. On my way from the airport to my new home, I searched for a link between the animals on the coins and the world around them. That spark was enough to turn me from an artist into a researcher who combed through all available data from an artistic standpoint. This interest led me to choose the subject of my thesis, which was influenced by this artistic perspective.

Figure 3: Animal Figures in My Previous Works

After living in Montreal for a year, I began collecting data in late summer 2020. Since winter comes earlier in this city than one would think, I tried to complete my documentation and observations before the first snowfall. I whispered to myself:

Like a wandering wave, each rock and boulder calls to me.

I'm on the move, to find out where I'm going.

Maybe I'll be able to relax on a beach.

Nature, our mother, invites me to love.

Find your mother. Find your love.

Listen to your heart.

I focused on my observations and data collection in the first phase. My intention was to sketch or photograph the dominant plants, trees, and animals in the Montreal region (Figure 4). For this report, I looked at seven different locations in Montreal, a beautiful city. I chose these locations because of their vastness and increased potential for ample biodiversity. Due to travel restrictions during the COVID-19[1] pandemic, which coincided with my data collection, I was unable to leave the city. Therefore, my data collection sites were all located within Montreal.

I first gathered data in the Cote-Des-Neiges neighbourhood, where my house also was, and where there are maple and pine trees, as well as squirrels. Every day, I became more aware of these neighbors' presence. Hence, I took notes and photos there in the first week of September (1–5 September 2020), during which I took notes and photographed my observations.

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[1] COVID-19: Coronavirus pandemic that broke out in 2019, affecting millions of people worldwide and causing a global lockdown in 2020 and 2021.

I next visited the beautiful Mount Royal Park, at the heart of Montreal. During the second week of September (7–11 September 2020), I explored this park many times. Other species found there include raccoons, seagulls, and ducks. I recorded my observations, in addition to sketching and taking notes.

Figure 4: *My Sketches during Data Collection*

The third locale I looked at was the Cap-Saint-Jacques Nature Park, where I spent 5 hours on 17 September 2020 taking photos and notes. Pine trees, maple trees, seagulls, ducks, and geese abound in the area.

On 25 September 2020, the fourth area I investigated was Angrignon Park. With its stunning scenery, the park welcomes visitors to discover nature's wisdom, and is home to geese, ducks, seagulls, squirrels, and pine and maple trees.

The fifth place I explored was La Fontaine Park. I took photos and notes, and documented the park's creatures in the first week of October 2020, starting 3 October, a Saturday. I saw ducks, seagulls, squirrels, and pine and maple trees, among other things.

On 11 October 2020, I visited Parc de la Coulée-Grou, the sixth location. The song of birds and the music of the river, like a natural concert, offered a performance of this scene in this lovely setting. Squirrels, ducks, and seagulls were among the crowd, as well as pine and maple trees. With my camera, I shot these scenes.

Situated alongside the Saint Lawrence River, Parc de la Promenade-Bellerive was the seventh and last place I visited on 17 October 2020. This park has ducks, geese, seagulls, squirrels, and pine and maple trees. Figure 5 sums up all of my observations.
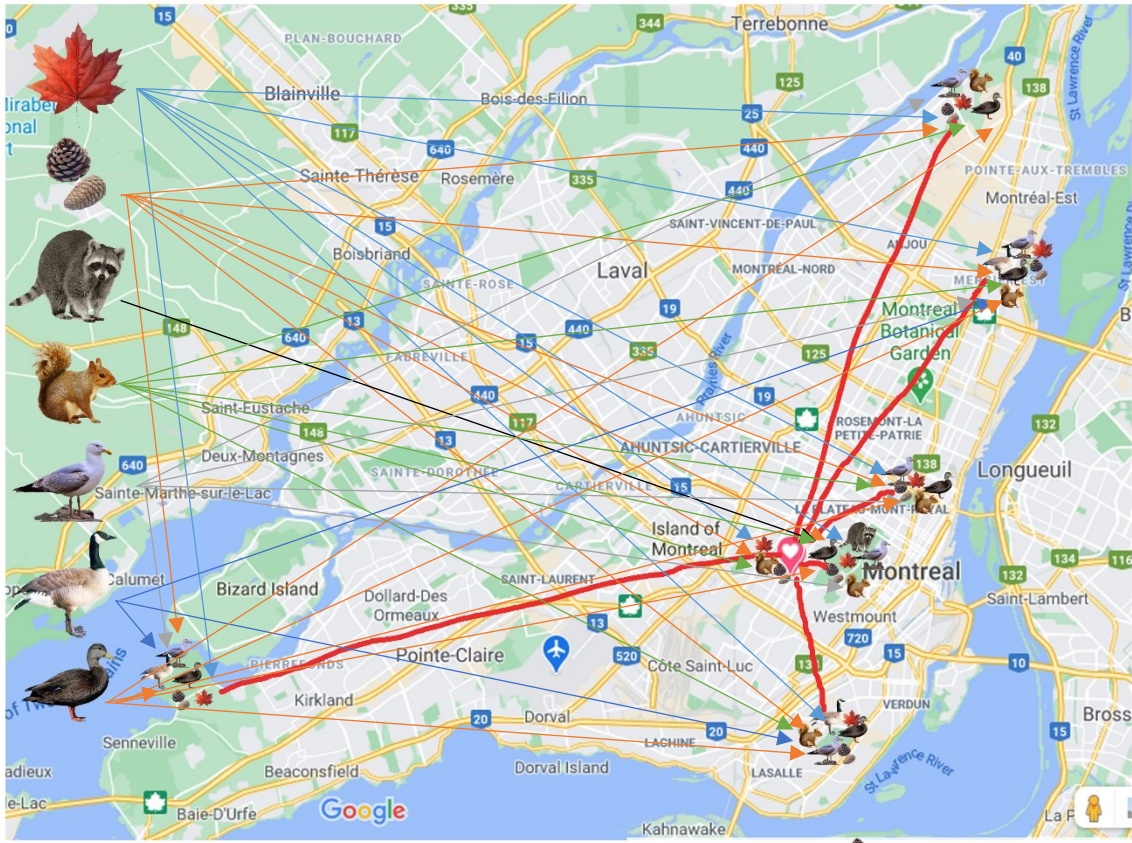
Figure 5: Data Collection Map

Chapter 4

PLANNING

I started the second phase of my research after collecting data through observation, photography, note-taking, and sketching documented items. At this stage, I looked back at my previous works and tried to find common ground between them and those I had observed in my new country of residence. Some of the elements in my earlier works (such as lions, goats, cows, winged creatures, and humans) were somehow replicated. The theme of wings has appeared in several of my recent works, including winged goats, winged cows, and the phoenix (Figure 1). Moreover, wings symbolized flight and soaring in ancient culture (Allan et al., 1999), so I chose to incorporate this component into my final work. Then I went back to all of the data collection sites in the Montreal region, looking for elements that had a strong presence. To do the final job, I made some sketches, combining the wings with the documented animals. However, the combination that I liked did not work out. Thus, rather than applying Canadian animal figures to my final project, I found the most common, more dominant aspect among the documented elements: the maple tree (leaf), which is present on the Canadian flag and perhaps the best option for my project (Figure 6).

Figure 6: My Sketches to Find the best Composition

The human quality—which has always been present in history, from ancient to modern times—seemed fitting as a bridge in my final work. As a result, I wanted my final design to include a maple leaf to denote nature and Canada; a wing for travel; and a human being to embody the artist. I integrated all of these symbols into my history and journey. Hence, I reviewed my previous works and images created from Zoroastrian symbols about humans, but I could not find a picture that included all of the features required in one job to use in my final piece.

Consequently, I re-searched Iran's history, especially for images of humans among Zoroastrian symbols.

After searching for and reading related articles, I came across Figure 7, which has the characteristics I was looking for: a flying human with two wings.

Figure 7: *The Figure of Farvahar in Persepolis, Iran*

Photo taken by Hanieh Hoseinpour (2015), ISNA news

This picture is from the Achaemenid era; the relief figure, which depicts a character named Farvahar, is part of the historical site of Persepolis in Shiraz. According to Zarrin Poush (2005), Farvahar has a winged body with a human torso, and has been used to represent Zoroastrianism since the 19th century (Figure 7). Bahram Shahzadi (as cited in Zarrin Poush, 2005) saw him as

an older man with a beard, moving through the middle of a circle that denotes the human soul. His right hand is open, with the palm of his hand facing upward, indicating both prayer and remembrance, as well as a reminder of sublime goals and the path to heaven. On his other hand he wears a covenant ring, which reminds a Zoroastrian to preserve (i.e., not break) his covenant. The wings are divided into three parts, each reflecting one of three principles: good thoughts, good speech, and good deeds. A ring, which embodies infinity or eternal time, surrounds Farvahar by encircling his waist. The two bands branching off from the central circle denote the two options or directions that people must choose between: good and evil.

My understanding of this work may vary significantly from that of its creator or historians. I see this winged human being as an allegory for myself, a person with different cultural experiences who wants to be a part of the modern world's peak stages and evolve and improve in my new place of residence. To unify my perception, I combined the figure of Farvahar with a maple leaf (Figure 8).

Figure 8: My Final Sketch, a Composition of Farvahar and a Maple Leaf

Next, I chose my final content. I searched for a suitable stone to use because I wanted to

apply this concept to a stone. I began by carving the winged human design into Jadeite stone. I

tried to make a maple leaf shape on the Jet stone, which I had brought from Iran (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Jadeite and Jet Stones, the Abandoned Project

Since I decided to demonstrate how I was becoming a 'Canadian gem,' metaphorically

speaking, I needed a stone that originated from Canada to serve as a backdrop (i.e., the maple

leaf) for my work and to tie all of the symbols together, because my reflection as an artist and my

message as a newcomer was to show that the right context can help a person grow and unite

different cultures. Hence, I abandoned this project as these stones were of non-Canadian origin.

They did not fit my idea and were not philosophically what I was looking for because I believe

that the Canadian context is what has enabled me to develop as an artist and as a person. As

such, I went in search of a new type of stone.

In my quest for a new stone, I wanted to meet two criteria: a stone that came from

Canada and that matched the color of the maple leaf (red). In terms of texture and color, I

thought a red Jasper stone might be the best option. After searching the internet, I found Jasper in

a store in Montreal that sold precious stones (Figure 10). By going to the shop, I was fortunate

enough to find a Jasper stone from Canada of the proper scale, color and size. All of my

arrangements were now complete, and I was ready to begin my final project.

Figure 10: Red Jasper Stone

Chapter 5

CONSTRUCTING ARTWORK

I started my practical work in early March 2021 after reviewing related articles on practice-led study, Zoroastrianism and its theory, and the Farvahar figure, which took about three months. I wrote an intuitive poem about the Jasper Stone before starting my final work:

What will happen to you, stone, now that you've departed from

the home?

Will you be a pearl or a ship at sea?

Perhaps you've chosen a fate on this trip. Be careful.

Wait patiently...

Before doing anything else, I created my design with Adobe Photoshop software so that it would be compatible with the stone in the desired size. Next, I used glue to transfer the print of my design onto the stone (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Transferring the Image

The second stage, which I video-recorded, involved carving the design into the stone; this was the most challenging and complicated practical part of the project. It took about 100 hours total; I worked for 3–4 hours a day. Since Jasper is a delicate stone that could break at any point during the process, I was very careful not to break it while working. On the other hand, I had to render the required scale in small dimensions (approximately 4 × 5 cm), which increased the project's complexity. In late March 2021, I completed this process (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Carving

In the next phase, I had to polish the stone after carving it to reveal its vibrancy and so that it could gain value.

A storm of events removed you from the land.

You were uprooted, broken, defeated, but promoted.

You gained experience and became a gem...

This rugged path leads to growth.

You are nothing more than a thug unless there is love.

Is love blind?

You are blind unless there is a goal...

you are precious...

For the final polishing I used respectively the 800 grit sandpaper to smooth out the initial roughness, the 1200 grit sandpaper for the initial polish, and the 3000 grit sandpaper for the transparency and final shine (Figure 13). Figure 14 displays the completed last bit of work.

Figure 13: Before the Final Polishing

You, who are you? A stone?

Are you separated from your mother?

How lovely and desirable you are!

Remember the words of the wise:

The reward for the effort is to be a gem.

Chapter 6

ANALYSIS

I decoded and analyzed my documented images and texts in order to answer my questions about the research strategies of recording and reflection, and how they can lead me to a new understanding. As Nancy de Freitas (2002) argued, "active documentation" and "reflective practice" can serve as working tools (p. 6). Active documentation helps us to critique, approve, and reconfigure theoretical attitudes and research objectives; moreover, "in a practice-based research project [the goal] should not be seen as the research itself, but the method through which ideas can be developed" (De Freitas, 2002, p. 4). Therefore, I compared my experiences and the underlying philosophy of my previous works to find common ground and then integrate the new cues with the information gathered. In combination with active documentation, reflective practice can succeed in the early testimony and recording of particulars that need to be carefully documented in a non-textual manner. Some artistic knowledge areas associated with materials or aesthetic judgment can be challenging to articulate and may be neglected in exegesis writing due to the difficulty of conveying the information (De Freitas, 2002).

Hence, I explored my works through non-textual documentation, such as photographic images, narrative media (i.e., video recording), and descriptions. For this process of active documentation, I considered the views of De Freitas (2002) and Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985): returning to experiences (recalling or detailing salient events); attending to one's feelings (using helpful feelings and removing or containing obstructive ones); and evaluating experiences (re-examining them in light of one's intent and existing knowledge, which could involve integrating new knowledge into one's conceptual framework). Also, according to Scrivener (2000), there should be a final reflective stage at the end of a project, which is mainly concerned

with the reported data collected during the research process. During the analysis, all previous, current, and post-project thoughts, as well as visual and textual records of each artwork's creation (including decision-making moments), should be taken into account. I wanted to capture and discover personal reflections while recording or performing the artwork I was making at the same time as I was reviewing my data.

I used mapping as a data analysis tool to organize and expand my observations of the documentation and reflective procedures I undertook during my series of works, as well as to expose the connections and shortcomings of these learning processes. Hart (1998) asserted that "mapping enables analysis and synthesis to be undertaken; in mapping work on a topic, you undertake the task of construction, putting together the different strands and elements of work that make up the body of knowledge on the topic" (p. 142). As I started to link the documentation and reflection processes, as well as connect them directly to my own work, mapping became increasingly important in expressing the information I had acquired over the course of the project and in preparing me to continue my learning. A concept map is useful because it can be constructed to show the relationships between concepts and practice, as well as include references to concrete examples, if possible (Hart, 1998). This description is especially vital because it explains how mapping has helped me in contextualizing and evaluating personal examples in critical and relational ways, as I created my data based on personal experiences.

I started analyzing my data by deciding which main pieces of information to include in the concept map. After going through all of my recorded data one by one, I made a list of significant milestones that had occurred before, during, and after the project, as well as final results that seemed striking or influential. My approach to determining which concepts to include was not systematic at first. Related ideas arose during the initial stages of data processing due to

careful recall, reflection, and instinctual identification. Obviously, my creative interests are reflected in the data, with philosophical concerns taking center stage. My rooted status as an artist came to the fore when highlighting these ideas. I have identified important experiences in my process of using the resources of documentation and reflection in relation to these preliminary concerns.

Most of the interactions I noted were thoughts or observations that had a significant impact on the process of creating the work. Identifying these ideas and writing them down helped me to "make sense of and keep track of data interpretations" as they first appeared (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010, p. 6). My goal in conducting my own concept mapping data analysis was to maintain a straightforward methodology that would favor the reader as well as the educational applicability of my thesis.

The next step in my data processing was to organize the data that I had intuitively synthesized. The role of visually mapping the data is critical to the data analysis process, since it is used to generate new context and information from the data produced (Mers, 2008). Choosing which concepts to include on the page is vital. To keep my intuitive approach organized and consistent, I wrote my notes in chronological order during the documentation and created a separate idea map for each phase. I wrote the name of each stage on a small piece of paper and then classified the ideas as either creative or documentary experiences. The addition of directional arrows from one definition to the next clarifies and highlights the relations between them. My concept mapping reflects this aspect of data analysis. I gained crucial insight and a wider viewpoint as visually recognizable terms became intertwined. With reference to concept mapping, I explain this process and the pertinent outcomes below (Figure 15).
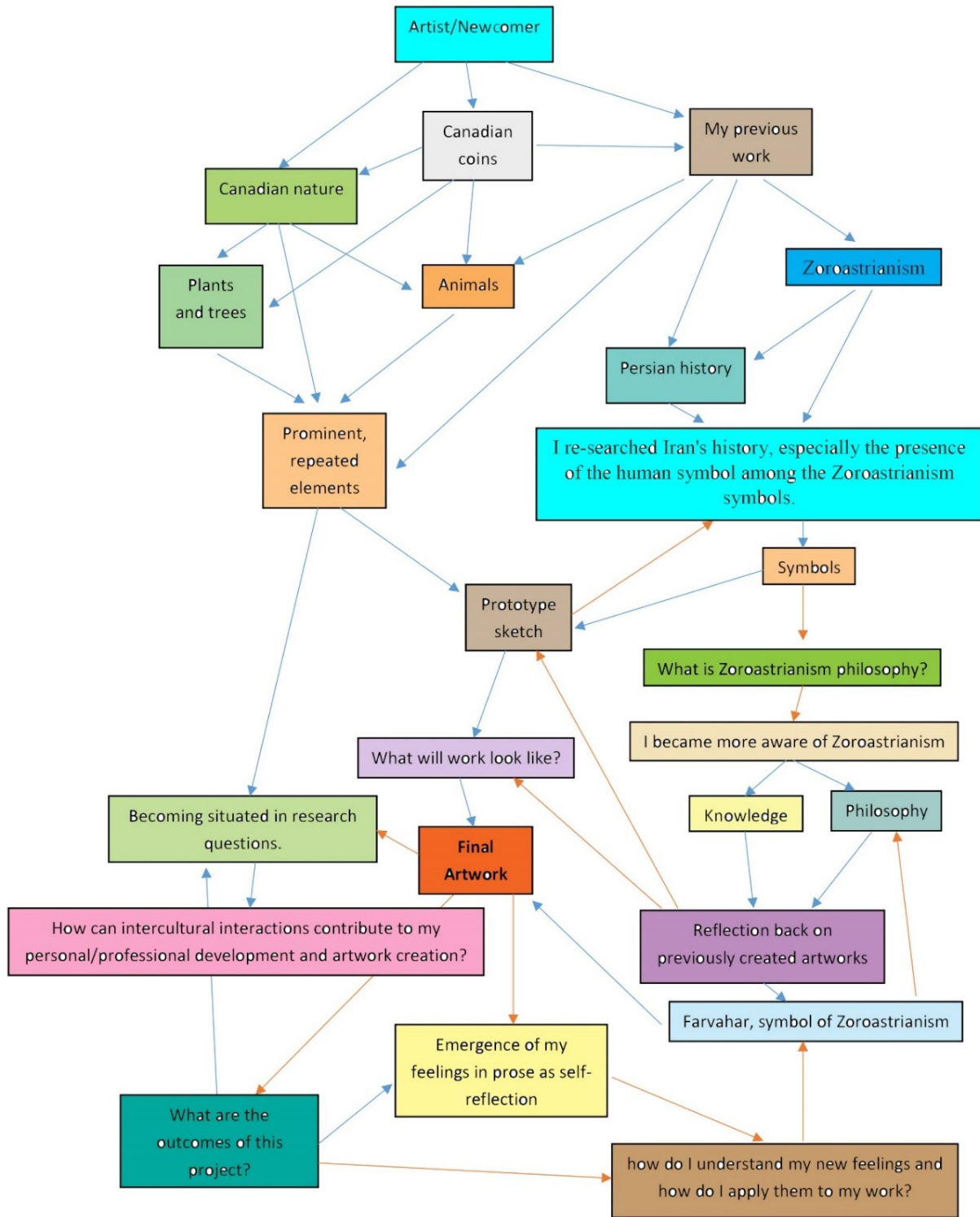
Figure 15: Concept Mapping

I was able to reflect in a more logical, contemplative way outside of the practices of art creation, recording, and reflection by visually reorganizing my experiences. Instead of being a finalized, holistic representation of research activities, concept mapping involves working through ideas in relation to a specific set of concepts (Kerr, 2008). For my own idea charts, I analyzed my own data by demonstrating relations and extensions, both textually and visually. According to Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010), "Concept maps work when they are read alongside textual analysis as a juxtaposition of the verbal and visual together, and as a means of reconstructing ideas in their relational manner" (p. 12). My goal in using concept mapping as a data analysis tool was to discover more relevant information from my reflection and documentation experiences. This shows the importance of concept mapping in the development of new knowledge. Rather than representing the entire study method, physical definition maps reflect the process of working through the analysis.

As an artist and a newcomer, as I stated in the introduction, when I first encountered and reflected on new events and spaces, I had many questions, which led to a connection to Canada and the history of ancient Iran. The desire to integrate my instinctual and intrinsic practices of learning and art-making into a clearly defined space where they could be explored and interpreted was my primary concern in this endeavor. Each step in my concept mapping indicates the path to the next step, as shown with blue arrows. My reflection on the subject is marked by orange arrows. For example, after reading about Iran's history and researching my previous works on Zoroastrianism, the question that emerged in my mind was, "What is Zoroastrianism's philosophy?" It was because of this issue that I took the next steps, which included becoming more aware of Zoroastrianism and expanding on my previous works with my new philosophy.

Concept mapping also helped me to grasp issues that came up during or after the final project. I was better able to make new connections, develop new knowledge, analyze complex topics by positioning myself as an interpreter of the data I generated, and use concept maps as a method of data analysis (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010). For instance, before selecting the final image for carving, concept mapping forced and encouraged me to revisit past works in order to choose the final image; by doing so, I realized I needed to review photos of ruins of ancient Iranian civilization and find a suitable piece in order to identify what I was looking for. I expanded my concept maps to include new conclusions, insights, and questions; these extended, unanswered divisions illustrate the origin and development of my practice-led research. For instance, after selecting the image of Farvahar, a high relief work from one of Iran's historical sites, my thoughts (as a researcher) turned to how this design has been interpreted in history books.

Documentation and reflection also persisted during the project in the form of my dialogue with the stone and the documentation of my spontaneous feelings as prose; I captured these thoughts as discourse throughout the project. I recorded emotional moments in my concept maps; the sum of these writings and emotions led me to one of the research questions: "How do I understand my feelings?" Perhaps my dialogue with the symbolic stone is a dialogue with myself in which I use metaphors to remind myself that life's events are always trying to signal how I can improve and become more valuable. To become a gem, one must remember the story of stones, which states that only through experiences, wisdom, and perseverance can one become successful and a gem.

Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010) claimed that with the growing interest in reflective practices in qualitative research and in giving meaning to voice in research texts, concept

mapping can be used to conceptualize emergent ideas before they take shape by giving a visual sense to messy thoughts during the analytical process, and by assisting researchers in visually representing ideas that arise from the data being examined. Concept mapping assisted me in completing my mind maps by addressing the thoughts and questions I had after I finished the final work. The data produced from reflection and documentation revealed initial concerns about the amount and accuracy of the data gathered in each phase of mapping. Each process and the data it produced (when considered and inspected further) demonstrate the difficulties of acquiring new skills in an already developed creative practice. The recording and contemplation processes became more intertwined as the artwork progressed, which helped me to recognize myself as an artist and newcomer in a new place of residence.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Significance of the Study and Implications

From a researcher's viewpoint, conducting this study helped me to better understand how to create a piece of art from the artist's perspective. A small idea can inspire an artist to create a more significant work. I have shown how a variety of factors (such as living in a new country, one's cultural background, or ecological space) can influence an artist's ability to produce a work of art. I feel as if I were searching for new things now that I have nearly finished this text, based on my previous education and experiences.

Completing a practice-led research paper improved my reflective and creative abilities, and supports the theory that reflective practitioners perform better than their non-reflective peers (Scrivener, 2000). My experiences influenced me during this studio-based study. John Dewey asserted that there is an organic link between education and personal experiences. Education must be focused on one's experiences in order to achieve its aims for both the learner and the community. Even though not all activities are instructive, experiential learning provides the most significant number of skills for lifelong learning (Dewey, 1938).

My research goal was to uncover evidence that contributes to the development of a piece of art and to document the events and feelings that motivated my investigation. However, my findings are not purely for my gain alone. I created meaningful artwork due to the new concepts and unexpected knowledge I encountered during the project. In terms of the project's broader applications and transferable activity outcomes (such as images and interpretations for those in my profession), it could serve as a case study (Scrivener, 2000). Both my artwork and my text, in terms of methodology, demonstrate the context of creating a work of art, as well as how an artist

deals with various issues that influence the process of creating, which can be used to decipher how a work is made. At different stages, artists academize art. To provide a more accessible and valuable case study for other researchers, I needed to be thorough and transparent in using concept mapping to analyze the data. I aimed to produce artistic research that would be helpful to artists and researchers in terms of self-reflection by focusing my written and creative questions on assessing analytical research techniques.

Following that, I will incorporate this newly gained knowledge into my education and art in diverse ways. I will continue to use documentation and reflection in my everyday professional life as an artist, educator, and researcher. I now realize that documenting what is being done is critical for providing thoughtful guidance, insight, and a record for future reference. This will be particularly useful when juggling multiple tasks, obligations, and jobs as an art facilitator or teacher, and when working on numerous projects over long periods. With the growth of this methodology in my professional activities, I have begun to record my new ideas to produce new works of art based on what I have learned from this research.

In light of my academic concerns, I believe that the method of producing my artwork was an ideal way to show the value of documentation and reflection. I identified several positive effects of practice-led study during my studio experience-based practice. However, my findings indicate that when an artist first incorporates documentation and contemplation into studio action, the path to creating a work of art can be vague, but that with time and the use of active documentation and concept mapping, the road to creating a work of art may become clearer. The flow of thoughts when making a work of art may be mysterious, but I was able to minimize the impact with the aid of the knowledge I gained from this study. Exercising caution prevents these

issues. Using this observational testing approach, I intend to establish practical troubleshooting guidelines for independent researchers and artists in the future.

This research forced me to pay more attention to my current feelings. I experienced these emotions when creating my work of art, which inspired me to explore another branch of literature (metaphors) to better articulate the final product. Documenting these events prompted me to consider another question: Is there a point in developing a work of art by an artist that researchers have missed and failed to record? Asking this question prompted me to consider an artist's works of art from a philosophical angle, as well as to imagine the conversations that may have occurred between the artist and his/her work during its creation.

Also, this research led me to consider the personal philosophies of individual works of art—in addition to the art itself—through numerous reflections that struck me throughout the process of creation. This study also continuously directed me to diverse historical, philosophical, and environmental sources during my research. Also, as a result of this study, I find myself constantly asking questions. In future visits to works of art, I will pay more attention to artists' secret, unspoken layers, as well as their spiritual concerns, at the time of creation.

Finally, the thesis results inspired me to continue researching how I might better comprehend the role of artists in the future development of culture. Since artists can play an essential role in developing the visual culture of a society, recognizing how they transition and integrate from one culture to another in a new place of residence can help us to better understand the visual culture of multicultural societies. As a result, for future studies, I am encouraged to investigate society's visual culture based on artists' works, stories, and non-verbal communications during the art-making process.

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