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**A Qualitative Inquiry into my Journey of Learning as an Artist**

**Kathryn Busch**

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**in**

**The Department**

**of**

**Art Education**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **A Qualitative Inquiry into my Journey of Learning as an Artist**

**Kathryn Busch**

**This research project studied how my art making is a learning experience.**

**Working from the idea that art production is a qualitative method of inquiry, the process for creating five paintings was closely examined. Through documentation, in the form of journal entries and visual images, learning strategies were identified and discussed. Drawing on the work of John Dewey and Mihály Csikszentmihályi, my art making is identified as a process of problem finding and problem solving.**

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**"Painting does not, as many people believe, make a man eccentric ;  
rather it renders him adroit and adaptable in every situation."**

**Carlo Ridolfi, 1594-1658**

## **INTRODUCTION**

**As a painter I have long been interested in how artists learn. I believe that many artists are self-directed learners, and that the learning process is actively pursued throughout the course of the artist's career. I contend that artists consciously or unconsciously set up problems for themselves in the studio that they can solve only by embarking on a learning process. More specifically, through the creative process, I believe that artists develop strategies for solving the artistic problems encountered in making art. The focus of this thesis will be on my painting practice and the ways in which I learn through it.**

## **ORIGINS OF THE RESEARCH TOPIC**

**I was seventeen when I became interested in learning. I had to decide whether I wanted to go on to a University or not. I decided not to. I wanted to learn, but I didn't want my learning experience to be boxed in or divided into subject matter (as it would in University). I knew that knowledge was important, but I felt that the process of acquiring knowledge was somehow even more important to understand. I wanted to find out what it was that made me ask the most questions, and what it was that helped me to find answers to some of these questions.**

I am a painter, largely self-taught. My approach to studio practice and learning has evolved over many years of inquiry. When I began painting, my focus was solely on the medium. As I became more able, more comfortable with the medium, I also became more interested in the history of painting. Through reading and viewing art exhibitions, I began to build a vocabulary that allowed me to speak about my work in terms of the continuing tradition of painting. As my own voice grew stronger, I became more focused on what I wished to learn. Specific artists and periods of painting were searched out, helping me to more clearly define where my place was as a painter.

Simultaneously in my development I was affected by feminist and postmodernist theory. These two theoretical frameworks guided my research in terms of providing a foundation and a context for meaning and making. As my practice grew, my artistic concerns and learning strategies began to meld together, one feeding off the other. That is to say, what I did in the studio affected what I viewed in the museums and galleries, as much as what I viewed had an effect on my practice.

My early formative years as a painter occurred at a time when the prevailing discourse focused on whether painting was alive or dead. If painting was dead, then why would artists still continue to paint? Yet if it was alive, it didn't fit in with the reigning critical theory of the time. Painting, it was believed was in a crisis. This crisis, born at the time when post-modernist thought was being disseminated across subjects and disciplines, no longer

rages with the same urgency, yet it has never been resolved. Following the work of Jacques Lacan (1977), a psycho-linguist, critical theory viewed painting as problematic in regard to the roles of signifier (paint) and signified (experience). The concern seemed to stem from the assertion that language is the form where thought occurs, yet at the same time language itself is deemed arbitrary as it is part of a social context and, therefore, not authentic or universal. Thus, experience, which is a construct of language, was also understood to be arbitrary. Paint, as a form of communication, failed because the plasticity of paint denied the word. The final conclusion was that art, and specifically painting, could not be described as experience. This discourse was on the periphery of my art learning experience. I was focused on the medium itself, and less concerned with philosophical issues in art. At the time, I found the question to be an intelligentsia exercise.

I bring up my earlier experience with critical theory as a means to connect my painting practice with current critical research that disputes the Lacanian model. I paint landscapes based on my memories from childhood. Dan Nadaner (1998) discusses how metonymy (where one word replaces another on account of some actual relation between the things being signified), a powerful concept in the Lacanian model, is encouraged by painting from memory. Nadaner uses as an example Edvard Munch's *The Sick Girl*, a painting Munch had done remembering his sister's last illness. Munch was 13

years old when his sister died, and the painting is as much about his pain as an adult as it is a portrait of his sister.

Munch's experience with *The Sick Girl* demonstrates the contribution of memory painting to the expression of subjectivity. By reading into the past but necessarily working in the present, painting from memory invites juxtapositions and the creation of metonymic relationships. Just as Munch's adult consciousness intersects with his childhood memory, his childhood memory intersects with his adult exploration of marks and colours. The painter sacrifices fixed contours for change and surprise. (Nadaner, 1998, p. 175.)

Nadaner suggests that painting from memory allows concepts and ideas, that would otherwise be difficult to make in language, to flow easily because of the qualities inherent in paint.

As I reflect on my experiences as a painter over the last twenty years I realize that, in painting landscapes based on childhood memory I have, actively and passively, embarked on a learning process that is still ongoing. From my personal experience, I have come to understand the important role that learning has played in my continuing development as an artist.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As a painter, I regard my work in the studio as a form of praxis. Praxis has been referred to as "a dialectic between critical reflection and action" (Zermuehlen, 1990, p. 9). "Expressive synthesis", a term coined by Henri

**Matisse, has similarities to praxis. Gooding defines expressive synthesis as the harmony between the artist's emotions, released through the act of painting, and a reflection or analysis of what those emotions mean in terms of paint. (1995) In the study of heuristics, Thatcher defines as the process of "aiding or leading on to discovery or finding out" (Thatcher, 1980, p. 401). From the perspective of Smith, "art is pure problem solving, and aesthetic excellence is solution achievement" (Smith, 1973, p. 184).**

**It is often said that artists don't ever retire from their profession. I would suggest that they never stop learning. This fact may account for the longevity of their interest in art. There are three branches within learning research that provide evidence to support my claim: continuous education, self-directed learning, and lifelong learning. Continuous education differs from continuing education in that a continuing education program is designed to give the most general and useful information in the shortest possible time. In continuous education, it is the problem that defines the learning. (Bock, Cohen and Tribus, 1981) Bock et al explain that :**

**This process then follows a well charted path of defining and redefining the problem, understanding the context within which it must be solved, deciding upon the general principles which should be used, formulating the specific method of solution, and evaluating the utility of the result. (Bock, Cohen and Tribus, 1981, p. 76)**

Bock's research was conducted with engineers and other professionals in knowledge-based sectors, but I was struck by the parallels between my method of problem solving in the art studio and his description. Through his study, he has found that motivation plays a crucial role in the professional practice of these individuals.. Engineers, scientists [and, I would add, artists] are "less interested in accumulating new facts and more concerned with assimilating new and promising experiences" (Bock, Cohen and Tribus, 1981, p. 78)

In self-directed learning (SDL), it is the individual who assumes control of their learning agenda. Self-directed learning can take place in educational institutions and community centers or it can be practiced without formal instruction.

In its broadest meaning "self-directed learning" describes a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes.

(Ebeling, 1994, p.82)

One aspect of SDL research which seems to apply to artists and their practices is self-undirected learning, which includes serendipitous learning. Eric Ebeling, an SDL researcher, examined how young children and some scientists use self-undirected learning. He discusses serendipity, a lucky find,

as having been instrumental in the work of scientists such as Sir Alexander Fleming, who discovered penicillin. Ebeling goes on to cite the work of James Austin, a neurologist, who identifies four classifications of chance associated with scientific discoveries. The four categories are as follows : (i) Chance I is defined as "completely accidental good luck" ; (ii) Chance II is where an added element of action is involved (i.e. 'keep on going and chances are you will stumble onto something') ; (iii) Chance III is defined as an aspect of sagacity stemming from a foundation of previous knowledge ; and (iiii) Chance IV involves a personalized action in addition to the other elements listed. Charles Darwin is often used as an example of serendipitous learning (or self-undirected learning) because his passionate habit of collecting flora and fauna led to his voyage on the H. M. S. Beagle. This voyage eventually led to the unintended publication of his book on evolutionary theory. (Ebeling, 1994, p. 88-89)

In his analysis of serendipitous learning, Ebeling concludes that "the attitude and the setting are essential for self-undirected learning among non-scientists. The attitude of the learner is probably the more important factor. A willingness to suspend educational agendas and an open-mindedness to broader educational opportunities make unanticipated discoveries possible for the learner" (Ebeling, 1994, p. 90).

The unanticipated discoveries that can occur in the studio often lead to a more formal process of exploration that can be described as problem solving.

I would suggest that this form of learning becomes self-perpetuating, as unanticipated discoveries build up through the course of learning resulting in more unanticipated learning. And so it goes on, until a life time has been spent learning.

Furthermore, lifelong learning is viewed as an idea, a concept, and a process all rolled together.

As an idea : it fuels the imagination with its challenge to the established order and its impatience with conventional educational institutions. As a concept : it entertains a range of assumptions about human nature, human learning, social change and the social order that are in conflict with prevailing belief systems. As a process : it projects all the trappings of revitalization movement which harbours the potential for creating a more satisfying and rewarding culture. (Cave, 1981, p. 169)

Lifelong learning is based on an interpretation of education as a vital force in cultural integration and in the democratization of post-industrial society. It is said to embrace a humanistic conception of development that seeks to strengthen the link between education and life, based on the idea that maturing progresses throughout all stages of life. (Cave, 1981) There is a commonly held idea that artists reach their peak at a more advanced age than other professionals. That is to say, where retirement is mandatory for most at the age of 65, artists are often seen as just beginning to attain a level of mastery at that age.



In his research on the characteristics of creativity, Mihály Csikszentmihályi (1990) identified three aspects of the person that help to account for creativity. These are the personality and value system, the ability to discover and formulate new problems, and the intensity of interest and motivation in the chosen domain. He later notes that "the most interesting characteristic of the creative process is namely, the person's ability to define the problem" (Csikszentmihályi, 1990, p. 191). This association between the creative process and problem finding can be seen as the central idea that connects theories in painting with theories in learning.

The kind of problems that call for creative thought share three common characteristics. First, creative problems tend to be ill defined, or poorly structured, in the same sense that the goals and procedures applying to the problem situation are not evident. Second, the problem situation confronting the individual is novel, resulting in a situation where rote extrapolation from past experience is likely to prove of limited value. Third, and finally, these problems require people to reshape or reform existing knowledge to generate the new ideas and new approaches. (Mumford, Norris, 1999, p.807)

## METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

I have intimated that art making is a problem solving process. Taking it one step further, I am proposing that art making is a type of qualitative problem solving and thus a form of qualitative inquiry in its own right. Therefore, for this project I have used a methodology based on the idea of "art as research" (Watrin, 1999).

As Rhonda Watrin (1999) has noted, research done in the studio can be said to have the characteristics of qualitative research. Watrin cites Bogdan and Bilklin, two researchers in qualitative inquiry, as having identified five features of qualitative research. They are : (i) the natural setting is the direct source of data and the researcher is the key instrument ; (ii) qualitative research is descriptive ; (iii) qualitative researchers are concerned with process rather than simply with outcomes or products ; (iv) qualitative researchers tend to analyze their data inductively ; and (v) meaning is of essential concern to the approach. (Bogdan and Bilklin, 1992) It is important to note that not all of these conditions need be met in order for a project to be seen as qualitative research. To varying degrees, all five of these features are present in my studio practice.

I view the natural setting as being the studio : the locus for research, reflection, and production. Since I am the researcher and the subject of inquiry, the collected data is, necessarily, of a subjective nature. As qualitative

research is descriptive, by employing detailed observation of the research and reflection used in my art making practice, I believe that the resulting data can be determined to be descriptive. As a qualitative researcher, my concern is with the process, rather than the outcome. That is to say that I am more interested in how I learn through art making, than in what I learn. In qualitative research, the data tends to be analyzed inductively. This means that a general conclusion is drawn from particular facts. In this case, the particularities are my notes and some specific aspects of my paintings. Finally, for a qualitative researcher, meaning, or that which is expressed, is central to the approach. In other words, it is the expression that guides the research.

John Dewey, in How We Think (1933), states that there are five aspects, or phases, of reflective thought.

In between, as states of thinking, are (1) suggestions, in which the mind leaps forward to a possible solution ; (2) an intellectualization of the difficulty or perplexity that has been felt (directly experienced) into a problem to be solved, a question for which the answer must be sought ; (3) the use of one suggestion after another as a leading idea, or hypothesis, to initiate and guide observation and other operations in collection of factual material ; (4) the mental elaboration of the idea or supposition as an idea or supposition (reasoning, in the sense in which reasoning is a part, not the whole of inference) ; and (5) testing the hypothesis by overt or imaginative

action. (Dewey, J. 1933, p.107)

In his support of art making as qualitative problem solving, Ecker, following in the work of John Dewey, established six stages of a methodological conception.

A presented relationship, the initial phase of the art work ; a substantive mediation, which institutes new qualitative relationships ; a determination of pervasive control ; a qualitative prescription where the artist anticipates qualitative steps ; experimental exploration ; and finally conclusion, when the work is judged complete. (Ecker, 1966, p.289)

### Procedure

My research project called for the creation of five paintings. This is a number large enough to illustrate my process of learning through questions, and yet manageable in terms of time. I began the first painting in September, 2000 and finished the fifth in January, 2001. Of the five paintings, I am still pleased with three (see Figs. 1, 3, 5). The other two (see Figs. 2, 4) will eventually be reworked in order to be pushed further, or to become brand new paintings. This is, in itself, one of the ways that I learn ; reworking a canvas until I am satisfied with the outcome. It is a reminder as well that there is always something else to learn.

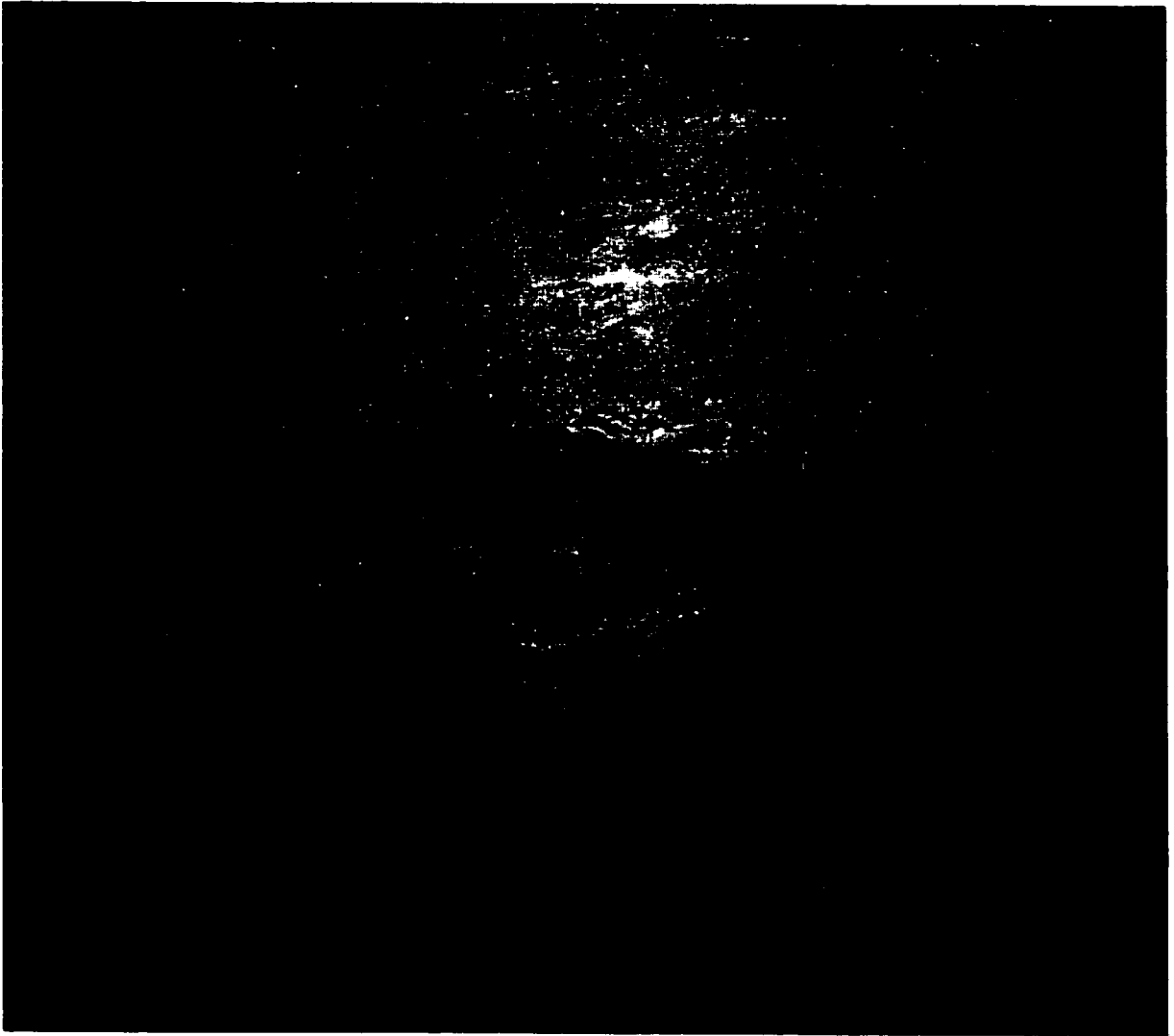


Figure 1. Painting # 1 (Prehistory), 2000, acrylic on canvas, 102 x 81 cm.

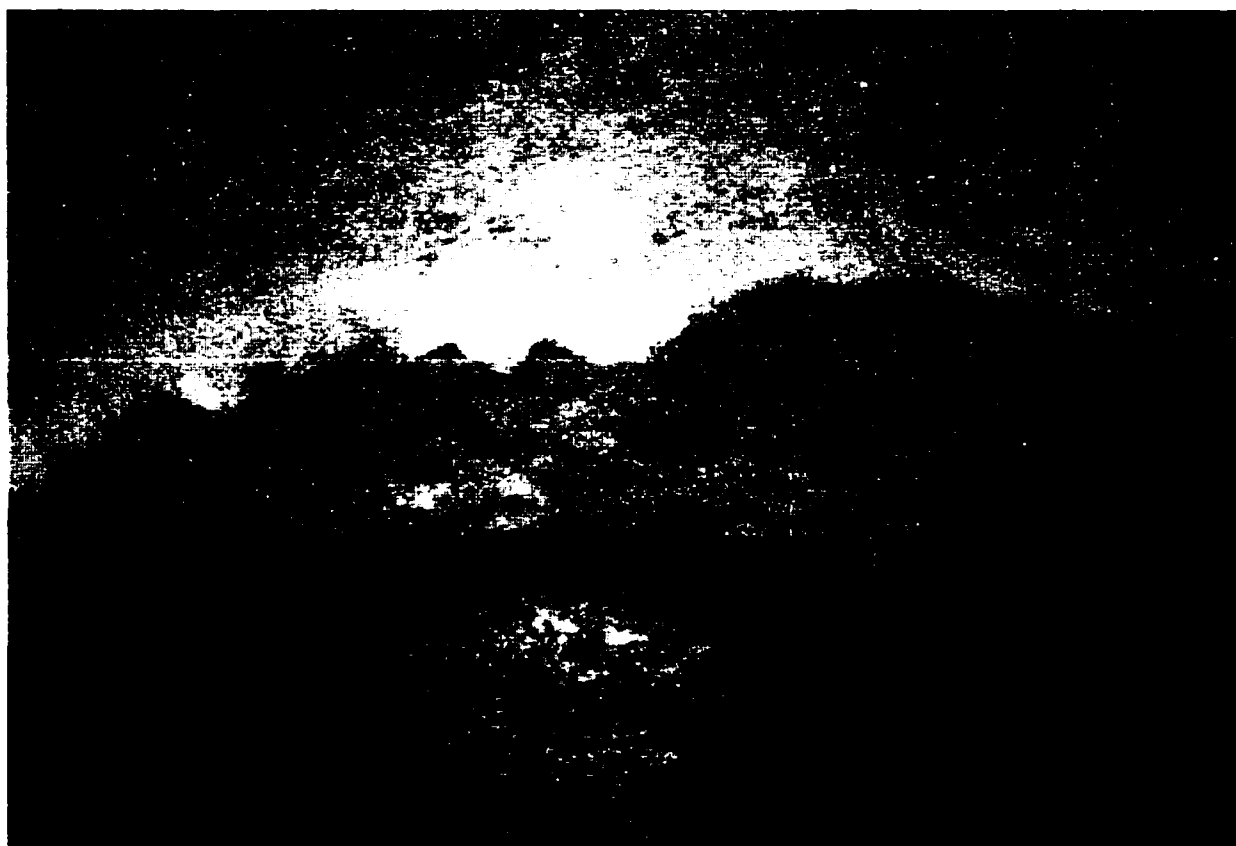


Figure 2. Painting # 2, 2000, acrylic on board, 55.5 x 36.25 cm.



Figure 3. Painting # 3 (Landscape), 2000, acrylic on board, 61 x 50.5 cm.



Figure 4. Painting # 4, 2001, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 117 cm.





Figure 5. Painting # 5 (Red mountain), 2001, acrylic on canvas, 40.5 x 79.5 cm.

While doing the paintings, I kept a journal to record my thoughts as well as the process I went through from start to finish. I decided early on not to re-read my journal entries on a regular basis, as I did not wish to begin analyzing the journal data until all of it had been written. I was concerned that I might unduly influence the outcome of my paintings. I wrote about whatever came into my mind when I looked at the piece or thought about it. By the time I had finished the last painting, I realized that there were patterns in my work habits, and that it was within these patterns that I could probably find how I learned.

To learn, as defined by Thatcher, is "to gain or acquire knowledge of or skill in ; to acquire by study ; to teach". (1980, p. 484.) This particular definition resembles my own understanding of what learning is. I see learning as being a process that need not have an end ; I believe that through learning I develop the skills that are necessary for teaching ; and finally, to learn means that I continually evolve as a painter.

## RESULTS

To begin analyzing my data, I read my journal entries over and over, identifying the words that could indicate a pattern of some kind. In the end, I came up with six categories that seemed to describe how I learned in the studio. They were : (i) overcoming obstacles, which includes issues about time and money ; (ii) exploring process & practice, which includes addressing conceptual ideas, formal inquiry and technical issues ; (iii) engaging in reflection, which encompasses perceptions and insight ; (iv) addressing

doubts ; (v) conducting research, where exploration of ideas and solutions to problems are discussed ; and finally (vi) making judgments and decisions.

These categories did not follow a prescribed order. That is to say that "research" may have been the first concern in one painting and the last in another, but was nonetheless an important part of my ongoing practice.

Likewise the category of "reflection" appeared at least twice within each painting, and usually more often than that.

The six categories resulted from an initial list of seventeen headings, compiled while analyzing my journal entries. The list included : money, time, continuity, practice, process, reflection, conception, solution ideas, exploration, formal qualities, research, decisions, doubt, hidden studio work, judgment, technique, and perspective. Money and time became one category called "overcoming obstacles". Conception, formal qualities, technical, and hidden studio work became part of the "process/practice" category, while solution ideas and exploration, a part of the category called "research". Continuity and perspective became the category "reflection" ; decision was grouped with judgment ; and doubt formed a category of its own. Reducing the list to six categories allowed for patterns to emerge, but it also reduced the overall number of ideas and issues to be found in any given painting.

When considering the frequency of each category, reflection appears to be the most dominant factor identified in my practice, followed by judgment, process, research, obstacles and, least frequently, doubt. (See Table 1)

	Reflection	Judgement	Process	Research	Obstacles	Doubt
Ptg. # 1	8	5	5	5	2	1
Ptg. # 2	3	3	3	0	3	2
Ptg. # 3	3	4	3	2	0	0
Ptg. # 4	4	3	4	3	0	1
Ptg. # 5	2	3	1	1	2	1
TOTAL	20	18	16	11	7	5

**Table 1 : Frequency of each category of learning.**

I believe that it is the category "reflection" that is the locus of problem finding, problem solving and, finally, solution achievement. Yet, this single category does not adequately describe the process of creating a painting or the learning implied in that undertaking. It is in all of the categories considered together and in the ways in which they interconnect that lies the actual learning.

## DISCUSSION

### Examples of the category "reflection" as found in my journal.

Here are some examples taken from my journal that recount the category of engaging in "reflection". From my journal entry of October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2000, I wrote :

I am looking at a detail of painting #1 on the computer. The colour looks how I remember it. I remember all of a sudden, a painting from my first year in university.

I presented a painting of a fish in a pond, with this red shape that was the memory of the occupied space that the fish took as it was being pulled out of the water. There had been lots of texture in this painting too. I had finger painted gel and modeling paste into it. The critique, led by Robert Murray, was a two hour discourse about everything I thought about in terms of my life and paint. It had been the first time I had talked about art so intimately, with so many people. I wish I could remember everything said. All I remember is feeling that I was ready to go on to something.

Looking at this image, I wonder if this is the same question, different approach, years later. It makes me think that it is the asking of the question that is important. The response always carries a new question. And sometimes I wonder if there are questions that can be asked for a lifetime, and never be fully answered ?

I remember in the critique that I had referenced a painting I had done in

the early '80's, as the impulse for the painting of 1994. And now in 2000, the link has been made again. Is there a core to this question that fuels me ?

The five paintings were all of landscape. As mentioned earlier, I have been painting landscapes based on my memories for the last few years. With these paintings I wanted to go beyond my memories and try to imagine how the earth itself "remembered". I wanted, and still want, to push the landscape as far as I can into abstraction, and yet still have it speak of land, and at the same time to allude to the passing of time. Of the five paintings, only one really comes close to that ideal, painting # 4. However it is one of the two paintings that I am not satisfied with. And yet, it is one of those core, pivotal pieces in my body of work. It's a piece that showed me things, made me see, perhaps, in a new way. This painting was a response to many questions posed, right from the beginning of the project.

From my journal, November 6, 2000 :

I feel excited about the paintings. They are starting to shift. I have seen things in them that I hadn't noticed before. All my views are of quite large vistas of land and sky. That is probably the prairie gal in me coming out. I am going to work verticals, to try and get beyond doing vistas. The next painting is 46" x 23.5". I will raise the horizon line.

A couple of weeks later I wrote :

Painting # 4 is evolving. At one point I thought that the painting was going

to be one landscape on top of another, on top of another, sky included. I've decided no to that, but I am playing with having landscapes flow up into each other and only one final sky at the top. I did a painting, probably one of my first landscapes, a number of years ago, and it was eight small landscapes pulled together by the frame. I had really liked painting them all together, and I would like to see if I can recapture some of that.

I knew immediately that I was not satisfied with the painting (#4), even when I said it was done. I felt that there was a problem, but did not know where the problem lay. I wrote on December 9, 2000 :

I wonder if it is the colours ? Perhaps it is the brightness of them that does not sit well with me (would be odd, since most of my paintings are bright). I have started painting # 5, and I think I am going to begin by restricting my palette to an almost monochrome.

Painting # 5 did not end up a monochrome. But perhaps painting # 4 will go in that direction. In a way, it was set up to fail. Within my process, I tend to work up the surface quite a lot before a final composition emerges. I generally have many boards and canvases around, that I use as palettes, or surfaces to clean brushes on.

I write about what I feel working on virgin canvas on November 20, 2000 :

I don't like how the first layers of paint sit on the surface. It has this rough aspect that I don't like. I like many layers on before a final composition is

decided. Painting # 4 is on virgin canvas. It can't be helped.

The failure of painting # 4 does not lie only there. I think I missed something basic when I did this piece. I think that I didn't approach it as a painting, but rather as a bunch of things to learn about painting. That in the end might be why it is a core piece. I learned more than I had anticipated, but I had to sacrifice the painting in the process.

#### Evidence of the other five categories from the literature.

Now I will attempt to make a connection between the remaining five learning categories and the literature. Jacob Getzels and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in The Creative Vision : A Longitudinal Study of Problem Finding in Art, believe that "there are *discovered problem situations* where the problem does not yet have a known formulation, a routine method of solution, or a recognized solution ; here the person must identify the problem itself, and there are no established steps for satisfying the requirements of the situation" (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1976, p.79).

Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi go on to say that "the work at the easel may itself be seen, at least in part, as a continuation of the problem-finding process." (1976, p. 80) In my journal from September 11, 2000, I write :

I am trying to change my approach to the landscape paintings. Whereas I have been painting landscapes based on my own memories, I would like to try to imagine how the earth feels/wears its own memories. I have thought constantly over the summer about how to do this. My mind thinks of



nothing. Only painting will help find the answer.

Later, on October 5, 2000, I write :

The painting itself is giving me new ways of seeing and studying. The touch of the paint brush or the palette knife makes me think of the layers of years that have passed.

And finally, from January 6, 2001 :

My guess is that in the very beginning, when anything and everything is possible, there is a sense of no direction, and only by painting does the direction come in.

Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi claim that a problem finder must feel challenged.

He must feel that there is a challenge needing resolution in the environment, must formulate this feeling as a problem, and then attempt to devise appropriate methods for solving it. That is, the problem solver must pose the problem before he can begin to think of a way of solving it, and when he reaches a solution—if he reaches it—he has no way of knowing whether it is right or wrong. Not only the solution but the problem itself must be discovered, and when the solution is found, it cannot be compared against a predetermined standard. It can be accepted or rejected only on the basis of a critical, relativistic analysis—as is the case with works of art. (1976, p.81-82.)

The need to overcome obstacles such as the lack of money or the lack of time was one that, in the past, I've not given much thought to. Yet, as I was

working on the five paintings for this thesis, I realized that it is a situation that some artists have been dealing with at least since the beginning of the "modern" era (19<sup>th</sup> century) when the "starving artist" emerged. For example :

I took a seat on the bench and looked all around me. I was not hungry, because I had been given three pieces of bread in the shop of an art dealer I know. Three pieces of bread with white cheese. It was raining, a thunderstorm. So I interrupted my business of visiting one shop after another and trying to get commissions for portrait painting.

(Schwitters, 1963, p.218)

Naturally I am broke, or almost. It is all too stupid, but since it is neither in your interests nor in mine to have me stop working, here is what I suggest : wire me, care of Sturvae, 500 francs, if you can. And I'll repay you 100 francs a month, that is for five months you can take 100 francs out of my allowance. At any rate, I shall keep the debt in mind.

(Modigliani, 1963, p.214)

What distresses me most is not so much the poverty as the perpetual obstacles to my art, which I cannot practice as I feel it ought to be done and as I could do it if relieved of the poverty which ties my hands.

(Gauguin, 1963, p.153)

I had been surprised at how often I cited lack of money or time within my journal entries. Though I cannot say what role these obstacles play in problem finding, they are definitely a problem to be solved. That they are often present within my process implies that they are a factor. On January 6, 2001, I wrote : "I realized I was getting down to the wire with paint, and yet I felt a surge of creativity. That it did not matter that the conditions were not just so. So I painted, using what colours I had, and allowed my brush to find the image." Earlier, on September 11, 2000 I had written : "Time and money are against me today. I had thought to buy wood so that I could build a stretcher, but it will have to wait until the end of next week. There is no money for it today. And I only have four hours for the studio, so I don't want to waste a minute." On September 15, 2000, I noted that "there is not enough gel here to do everything planned, but enough to get me started". October 5, 2000, I state : "I would like to do bigger pieces but I don't have the money to do so." From October 19, 2000 : "It has been a long time since I have been in the studio. Other work responsibilities and a sick child last week have kept me away."

What is clear to me from the preceding excerpts from my own writing and that of other artists, is that the very real obstacles that I face, in order to carry on with my work, does not prevent me from doing the work. What remains unknown is if they are an impediment to greater artistic expression, or a necessary component of problem finding and, hence, problem solving.

The next category I wish to discuss is "doubt and uncertainty". In the ways that I experienced them, they seemed to be more of a reflection on a decision that I had previously taken. Each time that I doubted my work, I was in effect questioning a solution idea that I had attempted. On October 2, 2000, I write : "I don't know that the texture works in bringing it across, especially having the remnants of the old painting underneath it. I wonder if I have to identify human occupancy to make it seem real. I don't know." Then from October 26, 2000, I say : "I just finished it, so I don't know how much I like it or not."

When I had finished painting # 4, I described how I felt : "I am pleased with it, in the sense that I think the painting is a good beginning for exploring the memories of the land. But at the same time, I am not ecstatic about the painting, which kind of surprises me. I have been working so hard to get to this point. Why am I not jumping up and down for joy ?"

David Ecker (1966) lists six stages of reflective thinking, which he believes correspond to the artistic process. In the final stage,

The work is judged complete—the total achieved—the pervasive has adequately been the control. It is a tentative affair because future evaluations may yield a conclusion for future modifications. (Indeed, some artists have maintained that they have never really "finished" a canvas).

(p.289)

Though I do manage to finish many paintings for which there are no future modifications under contemplation, often, I am tentative in coming to a conclusion. I sometimes will stop because I can't seem to see the painting anymore. I allow time to pass, so that I can see it again as a painting.

Within my process, as part of my practice, I have many paintings going on at the same time. I have been doing that for at least fifteen years now, and find it to be an integral part of my process. It probably came about from my dislike of blank canvases. It gives me the opportunity to build up surfaces on new canvases, and to work out ideas that emerged in other paintings. Or, the opposite, as when I write : "When I am stuck, it gives me another surface to work on—perhaps to figure out what the other piece is about." As a result of this aspect of my practice, I have some paintings that I have literally been working on for years. On November 20, 2000, I wrote :

I have done two other small paintings. I am not calling them thesis paintings. Perhaps because they are so small, but more so because they were not intended. They just sort of happened. Quickly on one hand, and then on the other, they were years in the making. While I was starting to paint painting #4, I needed to get rid of some extra paint and I grabbed these two boards, one that had been used as a palette and the other a painting I did not like. Things happened, clicked, worked. The paint on the palette that was already there suggested landscape to me, so I just went with it. A few brush strokes here and there, a bolder definition of shape in

some places, and voilà, the painting was done ! It took me half an hour to do a piece, or perhaps a more accurate assessment is to say that it took half an hour to finish the piece. But the intention of making a painting only came after the palette resembled a painting, rather than a palette. For a long time it was just a palette.

I sometimes wonder if working on many canvases at the same time is a strategy that I use to encourage my ongoing learning. Is it an attempt to answer the question "how can I preserve a continuity in my work, when my time in the studio is so fractured ?" Whereas the issue of money is often cited as an obstacle, the constraints of time seems to me be more potentially damaging. I do believe that there must be a certain amount of doing, in order for there to be a practice. When days and weeks disappear between studio visits, when I can hardly remember what the painting that I was most working on looks like, I do know that I will need to rely on the visual hints present in the painting to guide me to remember, or to take me somewhere new, when I am back in the studio again.

Much of my work as an artist takes place under the aegis of research. Within this category, I include exhibitions that I visit, books that I am reading, images that I am looking at as well as ideas that I wish to further explore through either thought or paint. I would suggest as well that all of the thoughts that I have about any given painting when I am away from it, are also a form of research. On January 6, 2001, on completion of painting # 5, I wrote :

I had been thinking about this painting for weeks and it just flowed. I often think that the painting is actually done in the mind. At least, once it gets to a certain point. With enough reflection, all of the problems get solved and then all that remains to be done is the actual painting.

When my daughter was born, I found myself unable to do any art work for about eighteen months. I spent that time reading art books and going to galleries and museums. When the time came that I could paint again, I found my work had changed in ways that felt much richer, from my earlier works. There had been moments in those eighteen months that I felt my efforts were wasted, but in the end, I had not wasted a moment.

Nicolas Poussin, an artist of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, wrote "I never feel myself so stimulated [to be painstaking] than after having seen a beautiful object".

(Poussin, 1963, p. 69) Antoine Watteau, an 18<sup>th</sup> century French artist, in a letter to a friend, writes about receiving a painting done by Paul Rubens.

"From the moment I received it, I have been unable to keep still ; my eyes revert tirelessly to the desk on which, as on a tabernacle, I have placed it".

(Watteau, 1963, p.86) John Singleton Copley, an English 17<sup>th</sup> century portrait painter, in a letter to his wife, writes "it is not the number of things that an artist studies, but thoroughly understanding those he studies and the principles of art that are in them, that will make him great". (Copley, 1963, p.97) Carel van Mander describes the research habits of Peter Bruegel, the Elder :

Peter painted many pictures from life on his journey, so that it was said of

him that while he visited the Alps, he had swallowed all the mountains and cliffs, and, upon coming home, had spit them forth upon his canvas and panels. With his friend the merchant Franckert, Breugel often went on trips among the peasants, to their weddings and fairs. The two dressed like peasants, brought presents like the other guests, and acted as if they belonged to the families or were acquaintances of the bride or groom. Here Bruegel delighted in observing the manner of the peasants, in eating, drinking, dancing, jumping, making love, and engaging in various drolleries, all of which he knew how to copy in color very comically and skillfully. (Van Mander, 1963, p.59)

I would venture to say that research done while working on any given piece, may not always be relevant at the moment, but that the research can contain ideas for future works. In my journal from November 2, 2000, I write about seeing an exhibition :

I went to an exhibition about two weeks ago, at the Marché Bonsecours, put on, in part, by the Belgian Consulate. The show, "The Colours of War" presents art works done by Belgian artists during the 1914-1918 war. There were some wonderful pieces, and some that were less so, but the exhibition shows the desolation of war. The landscape is dead. I would like to see how it looks now. Has life come back to these fields ? What memories the land must hold.



The last of my categories I entitled "judgment", and it refers to the different types of decisions that I consciously make while painting. I believe that this is one of the most important phases within my practice. Judgments and decisions allow for the piece to move forward. I see judgment and decision making as being complementary, but not the same. Often, it is because of a judgment that a decision is made.

For example, on September 11, 2000, I wrote "I began to register that formally the colours worked well together, but they do not work in the intended exploration." As a result of this judgment, I made a decision on September 19, 2000, where I "changed most of the green to a cadmium red/cadmium yellow medium mix, opaque, with a dab of yellow oxide." Likewise on October 5, 2000, I note that "even lots of gel does not mask the underlying texture (judgment). Next time I think I will sand (decision)." Later, on October 23, 2000, I wrote "Ugh, a very boring landscape. Two thirds of the painting is sky with a stereotypic, bucolic landscape with a road. I did it all in real colours, and when it was done, I knew that it was not anywhere close to where I wished to go." In my decision, dated November 2, 2000 : "I reduced the sky to only half the canvas, and worked with pure colours : orange, yellow oxide, maroon and green oxide. The composition remains similar to the beginning, though the road has disappeared." In my final comment about this painting, I state : "I feel like I have been ignoring form, or perhaps just not considering it enough lately. This painting has reminded me of it. Everything is better about it now

that I have approached it as forms rather than places. It feels more real, even for all the unrealness of the representation. Working with blocks of colour helps me focus more on the shapes that emerge."

In the previous sections I have made connections between the six categories of learning identified in my art making practice and the literature in art history and the psychology of art. Finally, I will relate my findings to the work of the respected philosopher and educator, John Dewey, mentioned earlier in the literature review.

John Dewey's five phases of reflective thought can be paraphrased as follows, thus drawing a parallel between Dewey's work and a problem finding/problem solving paradigm. Dewey's first phase, called "suggestions" can be compared to finding the problem. His second phase, known as "intellectualization" can be likened to defining the problem. Dewey's third phase, named the "guiding idea" is about generating solutions. His fourth phase, called "reasoning", is concerned with testing possible solutions. Finally, Dewey's fifth phase involves "testing the hypothesis by action". This can be compared to solution achievement.

The first phase of reflective thought which Dewey calls "suggestions", stems from the inhibition of direct action which results in the accumulation of ideas. A painting cannot be completed (direct action) until it has been painted. "Thought is turned in upon itself and examining its purpose and its conditions, its resources, aids, and difficulties and obstacles". (Dewey, 1933, p. 108) This

phase then, is the very beginning of a painting. In my mind, as the artist, the painting has begun to be visualized, even before a single brush stroke has been laid down. As exemplified in my own work, it is at this stage that I reflect on the orientation of the canvas or ponder the tonality of the palette to be used.

The second phase, which Dewey titled "intellectualization", is where the problem is defined. It is in this stage that the problem goes from being felt to being known. Dewey notes "that it is artificial, so far as thinking is concerned, to start with a ready-made problem". (Dewey, 1933, p. 108) Within the process of intellectualizing, the problem is defined simultaneously with finding a possible solution. That is to say that the problem becomes clear when possible solutions have been thought. The painting has been started, though it is likely that it is still in the very beginning stages. Whereas in my own work, I may contemplate in phase one whether to do a vertical or a horizontal painting, here, in phase two, I make a choice as to which orientation I will work with, or at least begin with. This choice will help me to define what the problem is.

Phase three, "the Guiding Idea", rests on the two preceding phases. "The first phase "suggestion", occurs spontaneously. There is no direct control over its occurrence. There is nothing intellectual about its manifestation. The intellectual element consists in what we do with it". (Dewey, 1933, p. 109) It is here in this third phase where we may get a better

idea of what kind of solution is needed ; where possibilities can be examined as to their pertinence or not, to the problem before us. This is the phase where a painting begins to take a life of its own on. In my own work, this can be seen as when a decision has already been made, such as the orientation of the canvas, and the possible problems stemming from this decision have been thought out.

In the fourth phase, known as "Reasoning", Dewey tells us that "reasoning helps extend knowledge, while at the same time it depends on what is already known and upon the facilities that exist for communicating knowledge and making it a public, open resource". (Dewey, 1933, p. 112) This phase can be seen as the place where possible solutions are carried out, or tested. In terms of my own painting, I view this phase as occurring when a fixed course of action has been decided upon. The choice of landscape or portrait format is no longer a problem, as solutions are available and only need to be acted (or painted) out. The painting is likely close to being finished.

In the fifth, and final phase, entitled "testing the hypothesis by action", the possible solutions are acted upon, resulting in either a completed canvas, or a return to other solution ideas. As noted earlier in one of my journal entries, in my work the decision as to whether a painting is finished or not can be tentative. Dewey states :

The five phases do not have to follow one another in a set order. On the contrary, each step in genuine thinking does something to perfect the

formation of a suggestion and promote its change into a leading idea. It does something to promote the location and definition of the problem. Each improvement in the idea leads to new observations that yield new facts and help the mind judge more accurately the relevancy of facts already at hand. (Dewey, 1933, p.115)

John Dewey's five phases of reflective thought, as demonstrated in this section, can be seen as an effective tool for understanding the continual learning that is inherent in art making. My art making, as evidenced from the discussion in this thesis, easily fits within this framework. As a result, I believe that the more I engage in reflective thinking, the better the chance is that the art work will reflect some of the process.

## RELEVANCE TO ART EDUCATION

I believe that this inquiry has relevance to Art Education in terms of teaching and learning. In his studio classes, Stan Horner (1998) often referred to the teacher as being in effect a teacher/student. He asked us to recognize when we switched roles. An important part of teaching was in still learning. For the artist, learning is part of the process that teaches her or him about art. Though the work in my studio may not be directly implicated in my teaching, the process that I use in my creative work serves as a reference that informs my lesson planning and the art making process that I teach to my students. Understanding how my art making process works and knowing how I learn through it, are as important to pass on as any other skill. Switching then from

the learner to the teacher, appears to me to be a natural condition of being an artist, as well as an art educator.

In order to write this thesis, I spent more time documenting my process and reflecting on my work than in previous instances. Through the analysis of my work I learned that indeed, I was still learning. Some of the categories of how I learn were instantly recognized and others were not. I am still not sure of all the ways that all of the categories help me to learn. This is especially true for "overcoming obstacles". Yet, I do know that finding out about my strategies has made them become more active, more available tools. Awareness of their existence means that I can wield them as I need them, just as I rely on my ability to create a colour palette and apply paint to a surface.

## CONCLUSION

I have not, as yet, mentioned my teaching practice, which is also a driving force in why I did this particular research project. I teach children, and more specifically young children. At one point, I realized that my studio practice and my teaching experience were not complementary. Neither seemed to connect with the other. Thus a crisis was born. How was I to maintain an interest in teaching, if I couldn't pass on the knowledge that I myself was actively learning ? I knew that the situation was remediable, I just wasn't sure of how to go about it. Doing the research for this project turned out to be the solution to my problem.

I believe that my commitment to painting is self-evident. Looking at my practice in all of its guises, as this project required, created new questions to ponder ; new avenues to explore, that were often about more than paint and painting. At this moment my teaching practice is with one student, one session a week. As I have discovered aspects of how I learn through making art, I have attempted to translate this into my teaching practice. This is, in a sense, a way to pass on to my students the tools of how to learn with art making.

Didier is five years old, and we have been working together since November, 2000. We did a video animation with clay figures, a project that lasted 14 weeks, followed by the creation of a giant mask (another 8 weeks). Our current project is book making. We are coming to the final stages of this latest undertaking, and Didier will soon have his own Pokémon book. And, what a book it is !

When we began this project, I was just starting to write this text. I was excited about what I was discovering from my painting practice and I looked to see if I could transfer that knowledge to my teaching. I pondered what it was that I did in my practice, and soon realized that I asked myself a lot of questions. So, how then was I to get my student to ask a lot of questions as part of his own work process? And, perhaps more importantly, how was I to encourage him to ask the kind of questions that would give rise to a "voice", to an expression that was heart felt.

We began the book making project by making paper. At the outset, Didier had not decided what the content of the book would be. It was during the second week of paper making that he decided he would do a book on his beloved Pokémons. I had been encouraging him to add objects such as seeds, feathers, string, etc, into the paper pulp, and he saw this as a transformation, much like how the Pokémons transform themselves. For those who are unfamiliar with Pokémons, they are creatures who transform themselves into a sort of super-hero, in order to battle for good. From that moment on, all of the work was designed to celebrate the Pokémons. Didier made about fourteen sheets of paper, with the majority of the sheets created for specific Pokémon characters.

The next phase of the project was to represent the different Pokémon characters on the sheets of the paper. I had already witnessed Didier's ability to act on the suggestions that the art making materials raised, and wondered if he would be able to continue in that line of exploration with the representations. To help facilitate the kind of learning that I wanted Didier to engage in, I insisted that, before he began working, he explain what the characteristics of the Pokémon creature were, and what the creature would transform themselves into. I became the student as he instructed me in the sometimes subtle differentiation between Pokémons. I believe this reversal of roles empowered Didier ; that it gave him a sense of authority. When he began working on the representation, he understood that he had choices



before him. He could draw or paint the creature as it was before the transformation, or likewise after the transformation. He could even combine the characteristics if he wanted to. It was his choice to make.

From my first class with Didier, I have encouraged him to look at the object he wishes to draw. Every week he brings in toy dinosaurs or Pokémon characters that he wants to draw. I get him to examine the object, to look at it from different angles, to name the features and to remark on anything that is unique to the object. Only after we have gone through this process do I allow him to begin drawing. We continued with this strategy while working on his book.

By now Didier was working on the fourth or fifth sheet of paper. The Pokémon was a fire spitting creature. He had done a drawing in felt marker, but felt that we could not see the fire spitting out of the creature's mouth. He decided to glue bits of tissue paper to the drawing to represent the fire. It was a good decision, but something was still not right with the image. I asked him again to tell me about the creature, what it is he does. I asked if he was like a dragon, because dragons also spit fire. Eureka ! We had found the problem ! This creature does not fly like a dragon, nor does it spew fire ; it spits fire and walks the earth. Didier looked at his sheet, and realized that his Pokémon was floating on the paper, which made it appear to be a flying creature. With a quick stroke of his marker, he created a horizon line, grounding the creature to the earth.

This example demonstrated to me that by asking my student to engage in reflection and to research the topic, genuine learning through art making did occur. It also made me excited again about teaching. The link that I needed to make between my painting practice and my teaching practice had been found.

In carrying out this research project, I discovered that artistic research is a viable form of qualitative inquiry. Following in the line of John Dewey, David Ecker and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, I realized that reflective thinking is the surest means of problem finding, and that problem finding is one of the bases of the creative process. Finally, I determined that my studio practice entails much more than just the act of painting, but also encompasses reflection on the process, the content, and the context.

In conclusion, I believe that the experience of recording my thoughts about my artistic practice not only resulted in this thesis, but also, perhaps more importantly, gave me new insight into my approaches to painting. I do intentionally set out to learn, and I do have strategies that aid my development as a painter. I would recommend this type of inquiry to any artist who wishes to know and understand more about their own particular practice.

“To choose qualitative ends is to achieve an artistic problem. Whenever qualitative problems are sought, pointed out to others, or solved therein do we have artistic endeavor –art and art education” (Ecker, 1966, p.289). Art making as qualitative inquiry creates an exciting opportunity for art

education research, as this area has only recently begun to be explored.

Through the research done for this thesis, numerous insights emerged about my practice as an artist and as an art educator.

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