Approaching the Formless:
the non-figurative art of the Hindu traditions
and its relevance to a contemporary arts practice

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DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed (candidate)

Date 30th November 2024

STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s). Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended

Signed (candidate)

Date 30th November 2024

STATEMENT 2

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for deposit in the University's digital repository.

Signed (candidate)

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Note on Language

I am aware that certain Sanskrit terms have entered the English lexicon, but I have chosen to use diacriticals and italicize even the more familiar words, as I want to stress their meaning within the specific textual reference or tradition, rather than an assumed meaning within current western thinking. I am therefore using *cakra*, rather than chakra, *maṇḍala* rather than mandala. Proper names are not italicized, for example, Śiva, Krṣṇa, Devī; *Kāmakalā-vilāsa* and *Sādanamālā* are italicized when referring to a text or folio. 'Hiraṇyagarbha' refers to the Basohli painting attriuted to Manaku, Hiraṇyagarbha to the diety of that name, *hiraṇyagarbha* to the concept of the golden seed-egg. Sanskrit words are transcribed according to the International Alphabet Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) system.

Acknowledgments

This research inquiry would not have been possible without the help and support of many people. I am indebted to the kindness and generosity of all staff and students at the King's Foundation School of Traditional Arts, where knowledge and skills are shared in an atmosphere of mutual encouragement. Particular thanks go to my Director of Studies, Professor Linden Peach, for his advice and guidance, and to my supervisor, Emily Pott, whose work within the area of Arts Practice as Research has been inspiring, and will continue to further the important work of researchers at the school. I am indebted to her patience and clarity. I want to thank Carla Marchesan, college librarian, for her dedication in assisting students. I have attended several practical classes at the school with Hanna Ward, Vaishali Prazmari and Dr. Renuka Gurung who are all masters in their fields of expertise and share their knowledge and skill with kindness and generosity. I have worked closely with Dr. Susana Marin throughout the research process. Her patience and precision in teaching Indian miniature painting allowed me to tackle subjects I would not have thought possible when I began the research. She has also guided my use of Sanskrit terminology. Susana's familiarity with the city of Varanasi, and insider knowledge of its many Śiva temples, allowed me to see so much in the relatively short time that I have spent there. I thank her for her generosity and hospitality.

I am also indebted to Nicola Durvasula, who has provided an indispensable link between the traditional and the contemporary aspects of the research. She introduced me to both Virginia Whiles and Joost van den Bergh within unexpected but serendipitous encounters. Both Virginia and Joost have been generous with their time, and I am very grateful to Joost for the opportunity to spend time with artifacts within his collections. There is nothing quite like handling an ancient Śiva *liṅga* stone to understand its significance. Joost graciously gave permission to reproduce images from his collections within this written submission. I visited the Indian miniature reserve collections at the V&A with Susana, and Nicola and I spent time with original Reinhardt Black Square prints and etchings of river stones by John Cage.

During my field trips to India, I was able to view original art works within the collections of both the Bharat Kala Bhavan and the Mehrangarh Fort Museum. Viewing images at the BKB was kindly facilitated by the curator Deepak Bharathan Alathur, and permissions were granted by the directors of the Institution, Dr. A. K. Singh and Dr. Jasminder Kaur. I am grateful to Dr. James Mallinson for putting me in touch with curators at the Mehrangargh Fort Museum and

enabling the viewings of reserve collections, which might not have otherwise been achievable in the time that I had in the city of Jodhpur. Viewing the original images and permissions for their use within the research was gracefully facilitated by the curator of collections, Dr. Sunayana Rathore.

During both of my field trips to India, I was fortunate to meet with Dr. Madhu Khanna, the first time by chance, as while I waited in hope of gaining access to the Ajit Mookerjee collections at the National Museum, New Delhi, a young curator finally suggested that while viewing the collections was not possible, maybe I would like to speak with Dr Khanna, who was working on their reorganization. Dr. Khanna kindly met with me at the museum on two occasions during that stay in New Delhi, and when I returned in 2023, I visited her at the Tantra Foundation Library and Research Centre to the south of the city. She graciously gave of her time, and access to her library. Discussing my research project, she asked what I thought I could bring to the subject. When I told her that I was working through arts practice, and showed a few of my paintings, she was enthusiastic, adding, 'Most academics are not visual, and that is vital for the understanding of *tantra*.' I thank her for her kindness and encouragement.

I could not have completed the research without the financial support of both Sir John Shepherd and Julian Barnard. I am indebted to their generosity. I also want to thank friends and family for their understanding, and ask their forgiveness for my lack of normal human contact while I have been obsessed with this project. Particular thanks to Jessica Wood for her company on the journey and unfailing encouragement, Mary Parsons for her constant reassuring presence, to Graham Challifour for stimulating conversation and wise counsel, and to my son Joe and granddaughter Skye for being there and being beautiful.

Abstract

Approaching the Formless: the non-figurative art of the Hindu traditions and its relevance to a contemporary arts practice

The aim of the research is to gain a deeper understanding of the non-figurative imagery of the Vedic and Tantric traditions through an Arts Practice as Research methodology. The research engages with traditional arts practices, and considers whether the practice of copying sacred artworks is able to inform a contemporary arts practice. The research questions whether the minimalist 'lack of signifiers' in the artwork allows a more immediate relationship with the work itself; relationship which enables 'experience' without commentary and interpretation. It questions whether this distillation might allow image to speak more easily across cultures, and may contribute to the wide appeal of these Indian abstractions. The research revisits and re-contextualizes the question of similarities to minimal works of certain western artists, and considers whether this approach to the formless Absolute may instill the work with a sense of awe, which is described within the Indian traditions according to the concepts of *rasa*.

Chapter 1

Introduction:
aims and objectives, methods and methodologies

What has form must rest on the "without-form".
...Hence the without-form does not merely precede
what has form as its starting point and origin, but
its operative, generative fundament; what has form
precedes continuously from it.

François Jullien

1. 1 *The Aim of the Research*

Since its exposure to the western art world in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the non-figurative imagery of the Hindu traditions has had little serious consideration. Tainted by its association with sex, and often dismissed in the art world as a new-age cliché, it has remained the domain of a few serious enthusiasts and collectors. The field of tantric studies has grown and developed in the intervening decades, and by adopting an Arts Practice as Research methodology, the research aims to bring a new perspective to the study of this imagery and its relevance to a contemporary arts practice.

The non-figurative imagery of the Vedic and Tantric traditions has fascinated me since my college years, and while I knew little of the origins of these small paintings, there was a feeling of recognition. At that time my paintings were large and abstract, empty with small horizontal and vertical lines to denote a feeling of spaciousness. Occasionally triangles appeared as markers within the emptiness. Despite difference in scale, these small works on paper seemed to convey the same feeling that I was trying to achieve in my own painting practice.

I first came across this imagery when I was writing my BA dissertation on early movements within 20th century art. I was interested in the breakdown in form, the stripping back to essentials in painting, poetry and music, and in particular, in the work and writings of Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian. I saw similarities between Malevich and Mondrian's work and the small tantric abstractions in the early publications of Ajit Mookerjee.[1] These similarities were discussed in a 1971 Studio International an essay by Virginia Whiles, written in response to the 1971 Hayward Gallery exhibition 'Tantra'.[2] Whiles considered affinities between non-figurative 'tantric' imagery and western abstraction and the juxtaposition of ideas and art works remained with me. I tore pages from the publication, and I lived with them pinned to my wall. I carried them around with me as I spent time living in Asia, following my interest in eastern philosophical thinking. Occasionally I tried to find more information, but my searches were disappointing. It was not until I came across Franck André Jamme's *Tantra Song* and a small exhibition catalogue called *Magic Markings*, published by Joost van den Bergh, that I felt impelled to take this search further. I was inspired by the poetic approach taken by Jamme, and the visual sensitivity shown by Lawrence Rinder in his introduction to the book.[3] Visiting van den Bergh's collections, housed

1 Ajit Mookerjee, *Tantra Art, Its Philosophy and Physics*, Basel, Paris, New Delhi, Ravi Kumar, 1983 (originally published in 1967); Ajit Mookerjee, *Tantra Asana,* Ravi Kumar, London, 1971; Ajit Mookerjee, *Yoga Art*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1975

2 2 Virginia Whiles, 'Tantric Imagery: affinities with twentieth-century abstract art', *Studio International*, 1971

3 Franck André Jamme, *Tantra Song: Tantric Art from Rajasthan*, Siglio, Los Angeles, 2011. Joost van den Bergh, *Magic Markings*: *Tantra, Jain and Ritual Art from India*, Joost van den Bergh Ltd. & Riding House, London, 2016.

in a small gallery in London's St James', allowed a close up and personal exploration of the actual artifacts. These were images to be experienced not simply explained. The subject needed a new approach, and although I had always been reticent to copy sacred imagery, I decided that I needed to explore the imagery through its making. This finally became possible through my engagement with the King's Foundation School of Traditional Arts, where I was able to work with teachers initiated into the traditions and practices which inform the imagery. The current research began at this point.

The initial aim of the research was to discover more about these works, what was their purpose and ritual significance? Were the visual similarities with certain images of western abstraction coincidental or did they signify a something more? Was there an influence of eastern philosophical thinking behind the western imagery as had been suggested?[4] These were my initial questions, but as I pursued the research another strand of inquiry arose. My initial engagement with the traditional arts was in order to explore the materials I would use in my practical research. I did not expect to become so fascinated by its methods and processes, which seemed to form an integral part of its meaning and transmission. I wanted to know how the processes of making could shed new light on the inquiry, and to explore the potential of engagement with the traditional arts within contemporary arts practice.

The title of the research, 'Approaching the formless', describes the thread which ties together my own work with that of these traditional paintings and the work of the western painters considered below. It also describes my experience of engaging with the texts of *tantra* which have informed the study. Bengali writer and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore asserts that '*rūpa*, [sacred imagery] as a symbol of the Infinite, moves from the formless to form, and carries

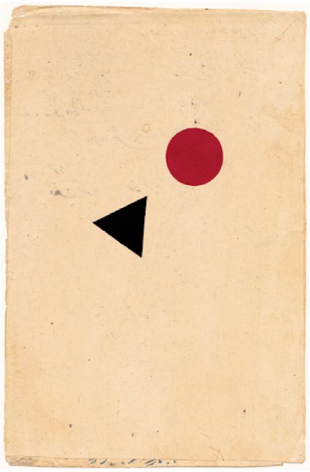

Fig. 1, 'Śakti pursuing Śiva', after Jamme, 2011, Plate 3, p. 23

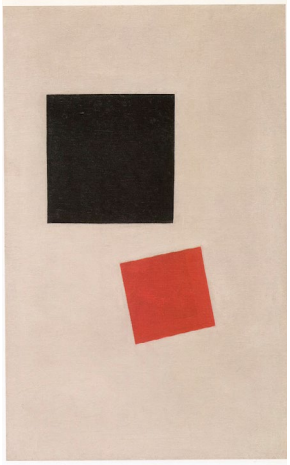

Fig. 2, Kazimir Malevich 'Colour masses in the fourth dimension', 1915, after Tate Publications, 2014, p. 105

4 This is explored in Chapter 6.

the mind of the aesthete to the formless again.'[5] Jamme describes the works in his collections as 'painted silences.'[6]

It is this ability of the work to evoke stillness and silence, to 'carry the mind of the aesthete to the formless' which is the focal point of this research, and which is explored through the making of imagery, researching the textual and ritual contexts of images, while looking more closely into the work and writings of Kazimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, Agnes Martin, and Ad Reinhardt. Through a radical minimalism, the work of these painters seems to have a similar capacity to lead the viewer towards the formless, and to instil a feeling of the numinous. The work is considered through its effect. Eastern and western imagery is explored not simply through its visual similarity – though at times this is striking – but through its performance and function. My aim is to understand these effects more fully.

1. 2 *Definition of imagery and my approach to the research*

The research explores imagery which has often been labelled 'tantric', and identifies four types of image which form the basis of the study:

1. The simple geometry of the *yantra*, which expresses the emergence into form and its subsequent dissolution.
2. The Śiva *liṅga* – specifically in its painted form of the black ovoid – which represents the formless nature of the Absolute.
3. Illustrations of cosmogenesis as seen in the *Hiraṇyagarbha* or golden seed/womb which carries the latent expression of form.
4. The *śāligrāma-śilā*, a term originally designating stones found in particular river beds, but also represented as circular paintings and usually found within the *Vaiṣṇava* traditions.

Working with these four types of imagery, I identified three ways in which an approach to the formless within these traditional paintings is reflected in my own work and that of the more modern painters. This became a guiding thread throughout the research process.

1. The distillation of form to simple geometries, horizontals and verticals
2. The formless – blackness, the Absolute, the void, emptiness or no-thing-ness
3. Primordial chaos, elemental patternings, 'chance'

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5 Tagore is quoted in Harsha V. Dehejia, *The Advaita of Art*, Motilal Barnarsidass, Delhi, 1996, p. 13. In his discussion of aesthetics in Indian art, Harsha Dehejia uses the term *rūpa* to denote sacred imagery, but suggests that all artworks may be capable of producing a state of 'higher experience'. This is an area of investigation throughout the research.
6 Jamme, 2011, p. 103

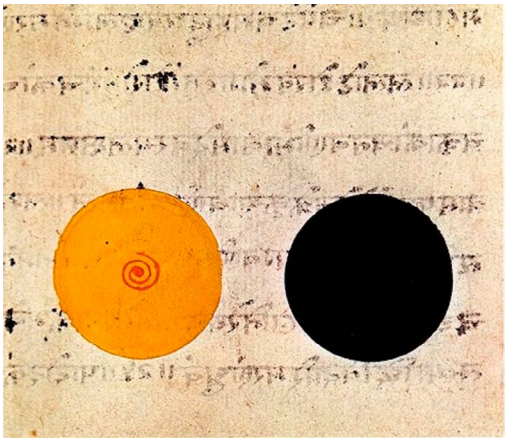

Fig. 3, *Śāligrāma*: after Mookerjee, Yoga Art, 1975, plate 60, p. 106

Figs. 4 and 5, *Liṅga*: from the collections of Joost van den Bergh

Speaking of aniconic Tantric imagery André Padoux says, 'Some include a dot, a *bindu*, which, in Tantric metaphysics and cosmogony, is the symbol of the undifferentiated absolute, both holding within itself the whole cosmos and transcending it.'[7] Considering this concept of the *bindu*, its expression within the *yantra* and presence within other small tantric abstractions, came to be central to the research.

1. 3 *Contextual considerations and terminology*

Although the research is conducted within the context of the traditional arts, I do not consider myself to be a traditional artist and do not work within a specific tradition. The question of insider-outsider positioning, an awareness of cultural appropriation, and the relevance to contemporary practice of the master-pupil learning structure inherent within the traditional arts, required ongoing consideration. Working with imagery used in ritual practice demanded "permissions", and it soon became clear to me that I could not engage in its making without the appropriate teachers. These possibilities presented themselves as the research progressed, but the question of my position regarding the traditional practices remained, and is discussed more fully in chapter 3.

Terminology also required consideration. I was aware that the word *tantra* has been misused and misunderstood, and that the term 'Tantra Art' may have little meaning in South Asia. Mookerjee's 'Tantric Art' collections contain much that may not be considered to be tantric, and as Andre Padoux suggests, 'An image, a deity, is not tantric in itself – it depends how it is used'.[8] Harsha Dehejia similarly defines the term 'Tantric Art' as 'ritual art'.[9] This points to the experiential, participatory nature of *tantra*, and the performative quality of its imagery, which

7 André Padoux, *Images of Beauty*, in Franck André Jamme, *Tantra Song*, Siglio, Los Angeles, 2010, p. 11

8 Andre Padoux, *The Hindu Tantric World: An Overview*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017, p. 148

9 Dehejia, 1996, p. 13

is discussed in chapter 2 and throughout the written submission. As a definition imposed on the sub-continent during the Mughal Empire and continued under the British raj, the use of 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' is also problematic, though still widely used in academic circles.[10] After considerations, these are used here to distinguish the imagery studied from that of Buddhism and Jainism.

I have tried to avoid a non-specific use of the terms "east" and "west" where possible, but in the 1960s, when much of my reference material on "western abstraction" was written, there was little discrimination between the various strands of "eastern thought". Zen and Vedanta, Daoism and Buddhism were often mixed up in a general appreciation of "otherness".[11] It is interesting to note that in his book *Eastern Philosophy,* Professor Chakravarthi Ram Prasad compares Indian and Chinese thinking, and begins with the assertion that 'eastern philosophy' as a concept does not exist, suggesting that Indian philosophy may be closer to the Greeks than to the Chinese.[12] While this may be the case within certain philological contexts, having lived in both India and Japan, in my experience, there is much that they share. These are very different cultures, but the influence of Mahayana Buddhism, which began in India, is found throughout East Asia, and is very dominant in Japan. But it is in the experiential approach to practice with its implicit understanding of body-mind continuity, and in the appreciation of a formless Absolute, that these "eastern" traditions coalesce. An understanding of meditation practices, which assume this body-mind continuity and appreciate body-awareness, is deeply rooted in eastern cultures. More importantly, these are cultures which, to use André Padoux's phrase, 'are not disenchanted'.[13] This 'eastern approach' allows for enchantment, accepts that divine presence may reside within an image, appreciates stillness and silence, formlessness and emptiness.

Wherever possible, the terminology I use when speaking of Indian imagery is appropriate to its tradition. The terms cosmogenesis and cosmology are used in reference to the constant and continual cycles of emission from and reabsorption into a formless, empty, ever present Absolute (*brahman*). This idea of emptiness, no-thing-ness, is beautifully expressed in this text from the *Śiva Purāṇa*:

> When the present world is not in existence, the absolute (Sat Brahman) alone is present. It is incomprehensible to the mind, cannot be expressed by words. It has neither name

10 Discussed in personal correspondance with Gavin Flood, of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, 19th April 2024

11 This is discussed in chapter 6.

12 Chakravarthi Ram Prasad, *Eastern Philosophy*, Weidenfield and Nicolson, London, 2005, p. 7

13 Padoux, 2017, p. 67

> nor colour… it is immeasurable, propless, unchanging, formless, without attributes, perceptible to Yogins, all-pervasive, and the sole cause of the universe.[14]

1. 4 *Rasa and the performance of the image*

The research considers the function, performance and reception of imagery, and I found the Sanskrit term *rasa* to be helpful in defining these inter-relationships and interactions. *Rasa*, though often translated as aesthetics, literally means taste or flavour, but also the essence of the thing – and more importantly, the absorption of the essence of a thing. Kapila Vatsyayan describes *rasa* as the quintessence of aesthetic experience for both creator and receiver.[15] Ananda K. Coomarswamy suggests that *rasa* implies 'a matter of absorption, not simply of observation'. He is speaking of an aesthetic experience where 'the object becomes the single object of focus and attention'.[16] According to Coomaraswamy, this fusion is dependent on an 'ideal sensibility and the faculty of self-identification with the forms depicted',[17] a matter of 'immediate assimilation (*tadākāratā*)'.[18]

Rasa is generally described as having eight possible manifestations, the eighth as *adbhutam*, wonder or amazement. A ninth, *śānta-rasa*, was identified by the 11th century non-dualist (*advaita*) philosopher of Kashmir Śaivism, Abhinavagupta, as the clearest form of aesthetic bliss. According to Ithamar Theodor, Abhinavagupta's ninth *rasa* defines the possibility to rise above the personal into a state of unity with the Absolute. This is a state of 'knowledge and detachment', rather than an extreme emotion of 'ecstatic ferment', which is suggested by the eighth.[19] According to Abhinavagupta, in the first eight stages of *rasa*, the essential self is still clouded by illusion. *Śānta-rasa* 'represents the *ātman's* [essential self's] essential position'.[20] This echoes Coomaraswamy's definition of *rasa* as a state in which 'knower and known, seer and seen, meet in an act transcending distinction (*anayor advaita*).'[21]

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14 *Śiva Purāṇa,* quoted by Debra Diamond, in Debra Diamond (ed.), *Garden and Cosmos, The Royal Paintings of Jodhpur,* 2008, p. 178

15 Kapila Vatsyayan, *The Art of Paradox*, filmed interview with Andrea Androitto and Werner Werk, Temenos Academy website. Vatsyayan was co-founder and later academic director the the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi.

16 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art,* Angelico Press, 2016 (1934), p. 7

17 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, 'Samvega: Aesthetic Shock', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 1943, pp. 174-179

18 Coomaraswamy, 2016, p. 12

19 Ithmar Theodor, *Rasa and Personhood in the Bhagavata Purana: The Integration of Aesthetic Theory with Vedanta*, MLitt. thesis, Wolfson College, Oxford, 2004, p. 102

20 Theodor, 2004, p. 94

21 Coomaraswamy, 2016, p. 6

In the *Upaniṣads, rasa* is described as 'a flash of lightning',[22] and 'a sudden flash of lightning … beyond our individually limited grasp',[23] and according to Coomaraswamy, *rasa* may be described as an 'aesthetic shock'. He introduces the Pali word *saṃvega* to denote the 'shock or wonder that is felt when the perception of a work of art becomes a serious experience'.[24] Although there are various interpretations and dimensions of *rasa*, essentially, it concerns the effect a work of art has on the viewer, 'the states that are awakened in the viewer.'[25] *Rasa* suggests the possibility of direct perception, and implies the ability to receive.

It is interesting to see that Coomaraswamy's 'immediate assimilation' is echoed in the writings of John Dewey where, in his *Art as Experience*, he suggests that, 'esthetic experience is a matter of immediacy of perception'.[26] Similarly, in the Introduction to Clement Greenberg's notes on 'esthetics' Charles Harrison writes: 'It was Greenberg's often-expressed view that the only proper means through which a sense of art's value can be acquired is through personal response on the occasion of a direct encounter.'[27] Greenberg insists,

> Esthetic intuition is never a means, but always an end in itself, contains its value in itself, and rests in itself. …Consciously or unconsciously, a mindset ensues whereby that which enters awareness is perceived and accepted for its own immediate sake; not at all for what it might signify in terms of anything other than itself as an intuition in the present.[28]

The concept of *rasa* provides a valuable tool to assess and describe the effects of works of art, both traditional and modern. Immediacy of assimilation, the unification of seer and seen, and the acceptance of 'the thing itself', its immediacy and presence, provide an experiential framework for considering the functionality of imagery. Greenberg's statement brings these ideas into resonance with the work of Martin and Reinhardt.

In considering this functionality of the image, I was drawn to David Morgan's assertion that within the study of 'material culture' and more specifically, 'religious materiality', there is a shift, 'from what an artifact represents to how it performs'.[29] He suggests that this moves beyond the

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22 *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* II 3, 6, *in* Coomaraswamy, 2016, p. 50. See also Valerie J. Roebuck, (trans.) *The Upaniṣads,* Penguin Books India, 2000, p. 33.

23 *Kena Upaniṣad 29, in* Coomaraswamy, 2016, p. 50

24 Coomaraswamy, 1943, pp. 174-179

25 B. N. Goswamy, *The Spirit of Indian Painting: Close Encounters with 101 Great Works, 1100-1900*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2016, p. 23

26 John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, The Berkeley Publishing Group, New York, 2005 (1934)

27 Clement Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics: observations on art and taste*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999, p. xiv. J. V. H. Greenberg (ed.)

28 Greenberg, 1999, pp. 4-5

29 David Morgan, *Material Religion*, Podcast, Sept 2012, (url. www.religiousstudiesproject.com)

analysis of images in terms of style and subject matter, and speaks of scrutinizing 'the practices that put images to use.'[30] This scrutiny of the performative nature of tantric imagery formed an important strand of reading for the research, but is also considered through the practical making of the images. It is the consideration of the performance of the image, the possibility that imagery may guide towards the formless, and aid in uniting with the absolute which guides the research.

1. 5 *Methodology: arts practice as research*

I am adopting a 'Practice as Research' (PaR) methodology, but as the research takes place within the traditional arts, which assume a concentration on copying exemplary imagery and working within a master-disciple relationship, it requires an appropriate methodological structure. In the early days of practical doctoral research within the arts, Christopher Grayling described three types of arts research: research *into* the arts, research *for* the arts, and research *through* the arts.[31] More recently, art theorist Henk Borgdorff further defined these ideas, suggesting that research *into* the arts may include art criticism, social commentary etc.; research *for* the arts, the study of methods and materials, while he only considered the latter, research *through* the arts, (which Borgdorff calls research *in* the arts) as 'artistic research'. He concludes: 'We can justifiably speak of artistic research ('research *in* the arts') when that artistic practice is not only the result of the research, but also its methodological vehicle, when the research unfolds *in and through* the acts of creating.'[32] While acknowledging that 'the discourses about art, social context and the materiality of the medium are in fact partially constitutive of artistic processes and products,' Borgdorff maintains,

> The distinctiveness of artistic research nevertheless, derives from the paramount place that artistic practice occupies as the subject, method, context and outcome of the research. …Methodological pluralism …should be regarded as complementary to the principle that the research takes place in and through the creation of art.[33]

Research within the traditional arts requires this 'methodological pluralism'. The use of certain methods and materials, for example, is not simply a matter of technical research for the benefit of arts practitioners; through my research I have come to understand that within the sacred

30 David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005, p. 32

31 Christopher Grayling's introduction to Macleod and Holdridge, 2005, p. ii, also quoted in Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research: inquiry in visual arts,* Columbia University Press and Sage, London, 2010, p. 77

32 Henk Borgdorff, The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research, in Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*, Routledge, London and New York, 2010, p. 46

33 Borgdorff, in Biggs and Karlsson (eds.), 2010, p. 46

arts, methods and processes may reflect both meaning and liturgy, and the materials themselves may have agency. Barbara Bolt suggests that this is the case for all arts practice, 'Materials and processes are not to be used instrumentally in the service of an idea, but are to be respected as an emergent form of knowledge in their own right.'[34] She describes this as 'material thinking',[35] which I would suggest is particularly relevant within the traditional arts. Practical engagement with the methods, materials and processes of traditional arts disciplines form a vital part of the project, leading to various insights that would not have been possible otherwise. This will be discussed throughout.

The study of social context (research *into* the arts) also has a unique function within the traditional arts, and more specifically the sacred arts, where it is important to understand the part imagery plays within society, and the ways in which that imagery is used. Nevertheless, the primary methodology of the research is the making of artworks. Through the processes of making, I engaged with the ritual and devotional practices which create the social context for the work. The making is enhanced by researching the literature and observing ritual practices in the field.

Robin Nelson describes a constant 'imbrication' between the practical and theoretical aspects of APaR, in what he describes as 'investigative praxis'. He proposes 'an iterative process of "doing-reflecting-reading-articulating-doing"'.[36] Barbara Bolt similarly suggests a 'double articulation between theory and practice, whereby theory emerges from a reflexive practice at the same time as practice is informed by theory'.[37] This interdependence of the understanding and questioning that comes through making, its reflection back into the reading process, which is then taken further in making, is clearly stated in Nelson's approach to Arts Practice as Research. It was confirmed within my process that these areas constantly intertwine. Nelson describes this as the 'integrative web of research', which reflects these close interconnections.[38] Not a woven strand, more a spider's web. While the arts practice itself is the constant thread which guides the research, the reflective reading spans 'a range of sources in several fields'.[39] One challenge has been to weave this 'integrative web', but it has been the often-unexpected resonances between diverse disciplines which have provided the most exciting discoveries.

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34 Barbara Bolt, in Barbara Bolt and E. Barrett (eds.), Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Inquiry, I. B. Taurus, London, 2007, p. 33

35 Barbara Bolt, 'The Magic is in Handling', in Estelle Barrett, and Barbara Bolt (eds.) *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, London and New York, I.B.Tauris, 2010, p.29

36 Robin Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2013, p. 21

37 Bolt, quoted in Nelson, 2013, p. 29

38 Robin Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts (and Beyond),* Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2022, p. 7

39 Nelson, 2013, p. 34

Susan Kozel suggests that a shift in awareness, the merest hint of a question, once pursued with intention and reflection, may be the beginning of research.[40]

> The intention to approach practice as research is the initial moment, the reflexive turn; it then needs to be elaborated, with sufficient depth, intellectual rigour, appropriate methodologies, an awareness of context, and related work.[41]

Similarly, in the second edition of his *Practice as Research in the Arts*, Nelson states, 'Attending to things differently may qualify practice as research'.[42] The relevance of this observation by Nelson became evident within the current research project when absorption in the ritual practices of sacred art began to both reflect and embody this shift in attention. Paying attention to these shifts, and the application of 'intention and reflection' in their elaboration, helped me to see the difference between being a practitioner and practitioner researcher.

The ideas of Nelson, Bolt and Kozel presented above suggest an open, reflective, and subtle approach to Arts Practice as Research. This seems to contradict Candy and Edmonds' insistence that the work must reflect and address a clearly stated research question.[43] I found that my initial 'question' changed as I progressed. Unexpected areas of learning arose from the making processes, and reading forced me to question initial assumptions. While holding on to the thread of the research, I attempted to navigate a balance between structure and open exploration. The 'iterative process' suggested by Nelson demands room for ideas to develop and shift, and I found his idea of a 'research inquiry', which does not imply such definitive answers, a more appropriate description of the process.[44] Graeme Sullivan also proposes the term 'research inquiry' and suggests, 'Knowledge is most informative and practical when it is fluid and takes on the shape needed …to arrive at this liquid state requires research that begins with solid yet unstable ideas.'[45] Sullivan states, 'It is from this sense of knowing and unknowing, and how we deal with it, that visual arts practice can be described as a form of research.'[46] Borgdorff similarly insists that the research must be 'discovery rather than hypothesis led'.[47] I was able to understand it more fully when I reread a note in my diary: 'Painting is no longer an "illustration" of emergence and dissolution, but a material and methodological process which takes place within the painting

40 Susan Kozel, in Biggs and Karlsson (eds.), 2010, p. 208

41 Kozel, in Biggs and Karlsson (eds.), 2010, p. 209

42 Nelson, 2022, p. 38

43 Linda Candy and Ernest A. Edmonds, 'Practice-Based Research in the Creative Arts: Foundations and Futures from the Front Line', *Leonardo*, Vol 51, No 1, 2018, pp. 63-69

44 Nelson, 2013, p. 96

45 Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research: inquiry in visual arts,* Columbia University Press and Sage, London, 2010, p. xii

46 Sullivan, 2010, p. 121

47 Borgdorff, in Biggs and Karlsson (eds.), 2010, p. 55

itself.'[48] I could see how the research 'unfolds *in and through* the acts of creating', while retaining its foundation in the methods, materials and processes of the traditional arts, consideration of the functionality of the image, and an awareness of its social contexts.

1. 6 *Knowledge, knowing and 'unknowing'*

In his *Foreword* to the *Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*, Hans-Peter Schwartz points out that within the on-going debate on the validity of art-based research, the most frequently asked question is 'whether epistemological potential is inherent in the production and reception of art.'[49] This inevitably leads to questioning what kind of knowledge or knowing this may be. Can there be knowledge without a definition of knowledge of? If we remain in an intuition of the present without moving into meaning-making, is this knowledge? What kind of knowledge is implied in Dewey's 'immediacy of perception', and Coomaraswamy's 'aesthetic shock'? What may be the epistemological potential of this Hindu sacred art? The research explores concepts of knowledge, knowing and unknowing within both non-figurative artworks of the Hindu traditions, and within the works of western abstraction that seem to perform a similar function. It questions what is understood by knowledge, and considers the ways in which direct sensory experience may constitute "meaning" in art.

In his essay on the production of knowledge in artistic research, Borgdorff introduces the term 'unfinished thinking', suggesting that art is 'able to open our perceptions and broaden our understanding, but not necessarily provide answers'.[50] This seems to effectively describe the kind of knowledge that may be gained through access to the art works studied below; an idea which is taken further by David Mafe, who, in a discussion on the sublime in mid-twentieth century art, claims the importance of the effect of certain minimal works to be 'a state of profound and positive unknowing.'[51] Within the context of the current research, and its attempt to understand an 'approach to the formless', this 'state of profound and positive unknowing' may provide the most appropriate definition of the kind of knowledge gained through engaging with this imagery.

It is important here to make a distinction between the knowledge or meaning that may arise from engaging with the imagery within a ritualistic, meditative or observational context (its reception), and that which is gained from its making (its production). Schwartz questions

48 Notebook entry, March 2020

49 Hans-Peter Schwartz, Foreword to Biggs and Karlsson (eds.), 2010, p. xxvii (Epistemology as the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope, and the distinction between belief and opinion.)

50 Borgdorff, 2010, p. 55

51 Daniel Mafe, *Art and the Sublime: the Paradox of Indeterminacy Unknowing and (Dis)orientation in the Presentation of the Unpresentable,* QUT Digital Repository: http://eprints.qut.edu.au/

whether epistemological potential is inherent in the production and reception of art. The observations of Dewey and Coomaraswamy concern the aesthetic effects of the image, which implies its reception, but the research also seeks to understand the knowledge about the imagery that is gained by engaging in its making. The central chapters of the research reflect on what is understood through the making processes, and more specifically the copying of sacred art. This understanding is then reflected back into the process of observation, into a greater appreciation of the works themselves, but also applying the knowledge gained through the making processes to enhance understanding of the works of western abstraction.

Any making process involves a kind of 'body-knowing' or what Robin Nelson refers to as 'embodied cognition'.[52] These ideas are made explicit within the traditional arts, with their insistence on the natural and the hand-made, and reference to bodily posture and breath. Susan Kozel describes her research as a 'phenomenological approach' based on observations made at the level of our experience, rather than a theoretical framework. She introduces the concept of 'kinepts', which she describes as containing 'both the overt sensing of the nervous system and the tacit sensing of the fluid system.'[53] I interpret this within the making process as a kind of intuitive, or maybe instinctive, body-knowing that feels discomfort when something 'does not fit',[54] and a kind of relaxation or ease when it does. The current research suggests that it is these subtle areas of knowing that arise through the making process, and that are made explicit through attention and reflection, that contribute to knowledge. It explores whether the understanding gained through the making process may be transmitted to the viewer, and how this may be reflected in Dewey's 'immediacy of perception', and Coomaraswamy's conception of *rasa* as 'immediate assimilation'.

The research therefore considers the ways in which engagement with the traditional arts, and particularly with South Asian visual culture, may help to 'reveal and articulate the tacit knowledge that is situated and embodied in specific artworks and artistic processes.'[55]

1. 7 *Methods*

In order to engage with this traditional imagery through its making, I needed to learn more about the methods, materials and processes of the traditional arts more generally. This involved extracting pigments from mineral and plant materials, preparing papers and gesso panels, learning to apply gold in various forms. Working closely with materials provided an unexpected area of learning, where the actual materiality of the substances I was using took on a new and

52 Nelson, 2022, p. 51

53 Kozel, in Biggs and Karlsson (eds.), 2010, p. 217

54 Donald Schön, *The Reflexive Practitioner: How professionals think and act*, Basic Books Inc., New York, 1983, p. 49

55 Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts*, Sage Publications, Los Angeles, 2010, p. 79

exciting dimension. As my interest is specifically in sacred art, I considered the role of the methods and materials of its making. How might the use of pure mineral and plant pigments affect the transmission and reception of the imagery? In what ways do the ritualistic practices of making add to the efficacy of the image? The research uses the experiential knowledge gained through making as the main tool of the research.

The research is carried out through painting, and while I questioned Candy and Edmonds' emphasis on the initial research question, I appreciate their insistence that the work is for research rather than exhibition.[56] The work is therefore carried out with the intention of learning through making. I began by copying various exemplary examples of sacred art, learning from the methods, materials and processes of each tradition. Chapters four and five explore the non-figurative imagery of the Hindu traditions, initially concentrating on the *yantra*, which demands strict adherence to tradition, and moving on to a freer more experimental approach to the imagery which is documented in chapter 5.

Robin Nelson suggests that 'a programme of reading of all relevant kinds should be undertaken simultaneously with the commencement of the practical inquiry to mobilize an interplay between practical *being-doing-thinking*'.[57] The research demanded a wide-range of contextual reading, as well as museum and gallery visits and field research in India. This continually complemented the research through making.

In order to place the imagery within a philosophical context, and to explore its use in ritual practice, I approached the complex area of Hindu tantric studies. This is a vast subject, full of contradictions, differing interpretations and each author/translator will have their own approach and opinion, some steeped in the rituals of their own tradition, others more academically distanced, but possibly failing to understand the symbolic language employed in descriptions of practice. It soon became clear that the immensity of the subject could be overwhelming and I limited my reading to the immediate field of study. Despite this complexity, the exploration of *tantra* and the philosophical ideas attached to the images studied, facilitated the identification of certain texts which provided insight and inspiration. I have been greatly assisted by the writings of André Padoux and Gavin Flood, the specific work on Śaiva ritual by Richard Davis, and that of Madhu Khanna on the liturgy of *śriyantra*. I also attended a course on 'Tantra' led by Gavin Flood at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, which provided a clarifying overview of the subject.[58] This was followed by a second course on 'The Self in Hindu Thought', also taught by Flood.[59]

56 Candy and Edmonds, in Biggs and Karlsson (eds.), 2010, p. 136
57 Nelson, 2022, p. 44
58 OCHS, Jan 2023 – March 2023
59 OCHS, April 2024 – June 2024

In researching the work of western artists, I drew on their own writings wherever possible. Malevich, Mondrian, Martin and Reinhardt wrote prolifically about their work. I also found the writings of Robert Irwin on art as research, and his insistence on the centrality of perception, to be illuminating. I engaged with the art historians and curators who base their work in these artists' writings, and where possible avoided the impenetrable 'obscurantism' of art theorists. I agree with my early teacher and mentor Jon Thompson when he suggests, 'So much writing about art is really writing about writing about art.'[60]

Fig. 6, Boooklet from temple stall in Assi Ghat, Varanasi; cover page, centre, and two *liṅgatobhadra*

1. 8 *Research in the field*

The images that formed the basis of the practical research required field trips to India, which I made in 2019 and 2023. During the first visit to Varanasi in 2019 I visited the Bharat Kala Bhavan, and was able to view both the *Sādanamālā* folio and the 'Hiraṇyagarbha', which provided key references for practice. I was fortunate to study both closely – an experience which reinforced the necessity to see original works, and where possible to hold them in the hand according to their original intention. By the time of my second visit in 2023, the *Sādanamālā* was considered too delicate for public access and the 'Hiraṇyagarbha' was on display in the main miniature painting gallery –– framed behind reflective glass, its stunning cinnabar frame concealed. The two field trips to Varanasi also provided an invaluable opportunity to see *yantra* as part of daily temple worship and given equal importance as the iconic imagery. I also observed female devotees sitting by the Ganges drawing *yantra* in powders and chalks, adding garlands of flowers and incense. Temple stalls displayed books of *yantra* diagrams to be used in ritual. (Fig. 6)

During the second field trip I also visited Rajasthan, to view images held in the Mehrangarh Fort Museum collections, and with the hope of tracking down some of the small abstractions and *yantra* on paper. In Jaipur, the Shree Sanjay Sharma Museum and Research Institute held

60 Jeremy Ackerman, Eileen Daly (eds.), *Collected Writings of Jon Tompson*, Ridinghouse, London, 2011, p. 18

Figs. 7 and 8, small *yantra* carved into the external walls of temples in Chandauli and Ghasi Tola, Varanasi (photos by the author)

interesting material, much of which was on view, but photography was forbidden and post-Covid restrictions made access to reserve collections problematic. Nevertheless, as I discovered during both trips to India, the most interesting meetings evolved through seemingly chance encounters. Through a chance meeting at the Sanjay Sharma Museum, I secured a private meeting with the current guardian of the Museum of Indology, and although the museum was temporarily closed, I was able to see several examples of traditional tantric works from the museum's collections. Similar chance meetings with paper, pigment and gold makers in the city provided a treasure of materials to use on my return. The slightly haphazard nature of meetings in Jaipur was contrasted by the efficiency of the Fort Museum in Jodhpur, and while disappointed by the small selection of paintings on public display, this was beautifully arranged and provided interesting information on both the methods and materials employed in the painting of their very unique collections. After gaining permission to search the museum's online archives, I was able to select and view the two paintings most relevant to my research: 'Three Aspects of the Absolute' and 'The Emergence of Spirit and Matter'. (See chapter 2)

It was equally important to view works of western abstraction in person, and it has been my good fortune that there have been recent exhibitions of Malevich, Martin and Mondrian at the Tate Modern, London, and Martin's print series 'On a Clear Day' has been on display at both the British Museum and Modern Art Oxford in the past few years. It is not so easy to see Reinhardt's black paintings, and although one of the Black Squares was included in the Royal Academy Abstract Expressionist show, it was exhibited behind reflective glass and difficult to see. However, the V&A hold a Reinhardt black-on-black print, which despite its small size, or maybe even because I was able to hold the image and examine it closely, had an extraordinary depth and presence.

1. 9 *The structure of the written submission*

Robin Nelson suggests a three-pronged approach to the APaR submission: the artwork itself, a documentation of process, and "'complementary writing", which includes locating practice in a lineage of influences and a conceptual framework for the research.'[61] While these threads of the research are inevitably interwoven, chapters 3, 4 and 5 of the written submission document practice, while 2 and 6 reflect its conceptual framework and lineages of influence. Chapter 7 integrates and reflects on the research.

Chapter 2. *Image search and contextual review*

This chapter discusses the introduction of 'tantric art' to the western art world, and defines the imagery to be explored through the research. The second part of the chapter explores the work of certain contemporary arts practitioners who claim the influence of *tantra* on their work. The third section looks into *tantra* itself, and reviews its transmission to the west, and the fourth aims to place the imagery which is at the centre of the research within its philosophical and ritual traditions.

Chapter 3. *Practical learning through the traditional arts: methods, materials, processes*

This chapter describes the discoveries made through practice within the traditional arts. It describes the research into materials, methods and processes and continues with reflection on the learning acquired through copying traditional sacred imagery. This lays the groundwork for the more in-depth study of Indian imagery.

Chapter 4. *Yantra – horizontals, verticals, geometries and grids*

Based in practice, this chapter explores the construction, geometry and associated rituals of specific *yantra*, concluding with the *śrīyantra*. It briefly considers the *yantra* associated with the *cakras*, and the so-called *Hari-Hara* or 'grid *yantra*'. It considers spatiality, horizontals and verticals.

Chapter 5. *Tantric abstractions and the potential of the void*

Informed by this imagery, the practice moves into a more personal exploration of the ideas, following the ritual journey through the *yantra,* to the central *bindu*, the gateway to the formless, the Śiva *liṅga,* the chaos of the unformed and its re-materialization through the *śaligrama,* and *hiraṇyagarbha.* This chapter considers blackness, chaos and cosmogenesis, merging the three image types through a more personal arts practice.

61 Nelson, 2013, p. 26

Chapter 6. *Approaching the formless through western abstraction*
In order to further understand similarities in the effects of certain works of western abstraction and the Indian imagery, I looked closely into the works that reflected these ideas. I wanted to know whether these painters were influenced by eastern philosophical thinking, and how they may see this influence in relation to their work. This chapter is divided into two sections:

Early 20th century Europe: reduction to the essence of form. This section considers and contextualises the work of Mondrian, Malevich, referencing the artists' writings where appropriate. It looks into the influence of the Theosophical Society and other spiritual and utopian thinking of the time, reconsidering its influence on the development of western abstraction.

Columbia University and Mid 20th century New York: considers a lineage of influence through Coomaraswamy, Dewey and Columbia University, where both Agnes Martin and Ad Reinhardt were students. It draws on their own writings, and the reflections of art historians and curators, in order to explore the methods and intentions of the artists as well as the reception of the work. It considers the ways in which the work of art may affect consciousness.

Chapter *7. Reflections and perceptions:* draws together the various strands of the research and considers its relationship to a personal contemporary arts practice. This includes a discussion of materiality and the performance of the image, perfection and the hand-drawn line, the personal and the universal, blackness and the void, and returns to the assessment of immediacy of perception and experiential knowing.

Chapter 2

Image search and contextual review

Our universe oscillates between moments of creation and destruction, evolution and involution, activity and quietude, expansion and contraction.

Richard Davis

Introduction

In order to situate the research, this chapter discusses the introduction and reception of 'Tantric Art' within the western art world. It approaches the subject of *tantra* itself, and looks into underlying philosophies and ritual usage of imagery where appropriate. It involves four strands of inquiry. The first defines the imagery to be studied through research within publications, exhibitions and museum collections. The second reviews more contemporary artwork influenced by *tantra*. The third considers the literature of *tantra* and its transmission to the west. The fourth explores the philosophical and ritual contexts of the imagery, referring to primary sources where appropriate. This aspect of the study continued throughout the research process, and became increasingly refined as the practical work progressed.

Fig. 9, Cover Image, *Yoga Art*, Ajit Mookerjee, 1975

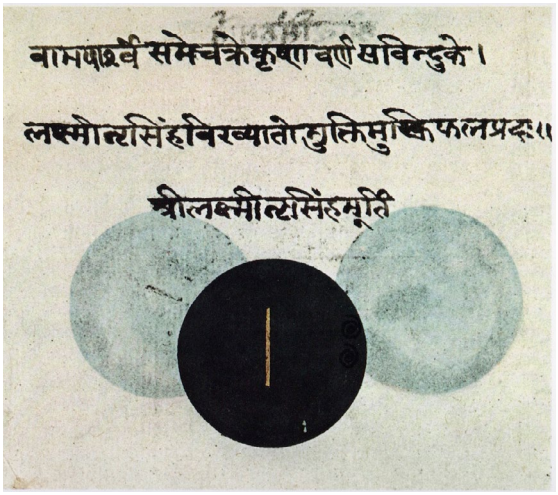


Fig. 10 Rajasthan 19th c., After Mookerjee, 1975, plate 57, p. 101

2. 1 *Search for imagery: 'Tantra Art' and its introduction to the western artworld*

The non-figurative Indian imagery which forms the basis of my research came to the attention of the western art-world through the 1967 publication of Ajit Mookerjee's *Tantra Art*.[1] This collection of images, while dominated by figurative painting and sculpture, presented several 'tantric abstractions', small works on paper which were shocking in their simplicity, and which were in tune with the kind of "hard-edged" painting that was current in both the art world and art institutions at that time. The book inspired the much cited exhibition 'Tantra' at the Hayward Gallery, London, in 1971.[2] The exhibition was curated by Philip Rawson, and many of the artifacts were drawn from Mookerjee's collections, as well as those of Jean-Claude Ciancimino, who had already shown tantric works in his London gallery in 1968. 1971 also saw a second publication

1 Ajit Mookerjee, *Tantra Art, Its Philosophy and Physics*, Basel, Paris, New Delhi, Ravi Kumar, 1983 (originally published in 1967)

2 Tantra, Hayward Gallery, London, Sept 30th-Nov 7th 1971

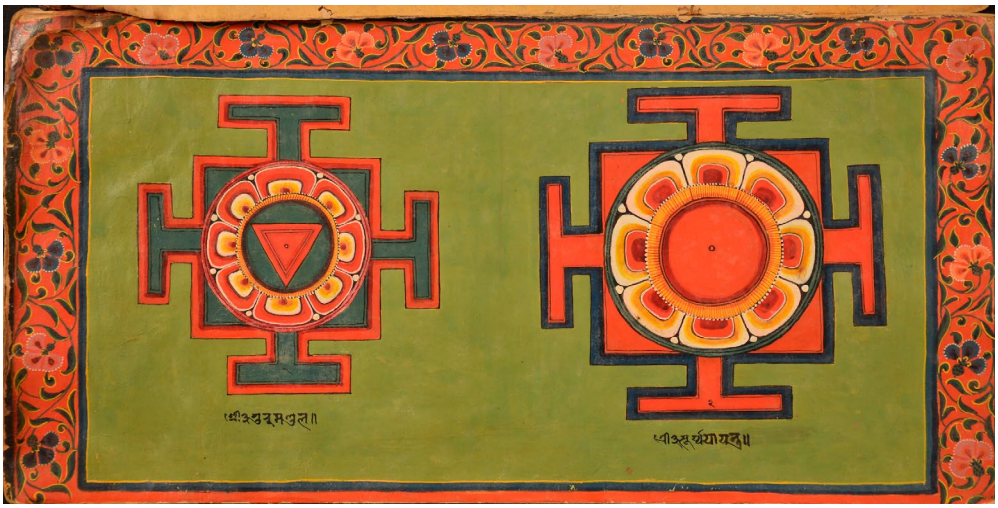


Fig. 11, Two *yantra* from the mid-18th century Nepali folio *Sādanamālā*, Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi (with permissions)

by Mookerjee, *Tantra Asana*.[3] A third, *Yoga Art,* published in 1975, introduced more of the small circular abstractions which Mookerjee called 'manuscript leaves illustrating phases of the evolution and dissolution of cosmic from', and which he occasionally referred to as *śāligrāma* (figs. 9 and 10).[4] These early Mookerjee publications provided a wealth of imagery, but they lacked contextualization. This was partly addressed by his 1977 collaboration with Madhu Khanna, *The Tantric Way: Art Science Ritual*,[5] which included a section on *yantra* and *maṇḍala*, drawing on the research of Heinrich Zimmer and Guiseppe Tucci. Khanna's *Yantra: The Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity*, followed in 1978,[6] and introduced the imagery of the *Sādanamālā*, the mid-18th century Nepali folio which became a key reference for my practical research into *yantra* (fig. 11). After researching her publication on *yantra*, Khanna went on to explore the *śrīyantra* (great *yantra*) in her doctoral dissertation *The Concept and Liturgy of the Śrīcakra*.[7] Completed in 1986, her work was hailed by André Padoux as the definitive study on the subject, and was a valuable resource for my research.[8]

Khanna remains an influential figure in the study of *tantra* and in 2004 established the Tantra Foundation and Library in New Delhi, which provides residencies for research into *tantra*. In 2017 she received a Government of India grant to catalogue the Mookerjee collections, now

3 Ajit Mookerjee, *Tantra Asana,* Ravi Kumar, London, 1971

4 Ajit Mookerjee, *Yoga Art*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1975, p. 57-61, 109

5 Ajit Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna, *The Tantric Way, Art Science Ritual*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1977

6 Madhu Khanna, *Yantra: The Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity,* Rochester, Inner Traditions, 2003 (1979)

7 Madhu Khanna, *The Concept and Liturgy of the Śrīcakra based on Śivānanda's Trilogy,* doctoral dissertation, Weston College Oxford, 1986. *Śrīyantra* and *śrīcakra* are used interchangeably here.

8 André Padoux, 'The Śrīcakra According to the First Chapter of the Yoginīhṛdaya', in Gudrun Bühnemann (ed.), *Mandalas and Yantras in the Hindu Traditions*, D. K. Printworld, New Delhi, 2007, p. 248, note 22

Fig. 12, 'Hiraṇyagarbha', Basohli, 18th c., attributed to Manaku.
Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi (with permissions)

held by the National Museum in New Delhi.[9] While my visits to the National Museum to view the Mookerjee collections were not productive, I was able to observe the *Sādanamālā* at the Bharat Kala Bhavan, the museum associated with Benares Hindu University in Varanasi. The museum also holds the original of the well known miniature painting the 'Hiraṇyagarbha', the golden seed-egg, attributed to Manaku of Basohli, and which illustrates a section of the text of the *Bhagāvata Purāṇa* relating to cosmogenesis (fig. 12). While this would not be considered as a tantric image, the early Mookerjee publications *Tantra Art* and *Yoga Art* both included reproductions of 'Hiraṇyagarbha'.[10] This extraordinary illustration also became an important resource for my research, and I was fortunate to spend time with both *Sādanamālā* and 'Hiraṇyagarbha' during field trips to Varanasi in both 2019 and 2023. These field trips also provided the opportunity to explore the Śiva temples of the city, to observe ritual and to see *yantra* as part of daily temple worship, as well as in temporary form, made on the ground with coloured powders during festival celebrations.

2. 1. 1 '*Tantric Art' and western abstraction*

In response to Mookerjee's publications and the 1971 'Tantra' exhibition, Virginia Whiles wrote her seminal *Studio International* essay 'Tantric Imagery: affinities with twentieth-century abstract art'.[11] The essay provided a considered appraisal of similarities between non-figurative

9 Private conversations with Madhu Khanna at the National Museum, New Delhi, October 28th and 29th, 2019.
10 Mookerjee, 1983 (1967), p. 58; Mookerjee, 1975, p. 88
11 Virginia Whiles, 'Tantric Imagery: affinities with twentieth-century abstract art', *Studio International*, 1971

Fig. 13, Original poster for the 'Tantra' exhibition, Hayward Gallery, London, 1971

Fig. 14, Catalogue for the 'Tantra' exhibition, Hayward Gallery, London, 1971

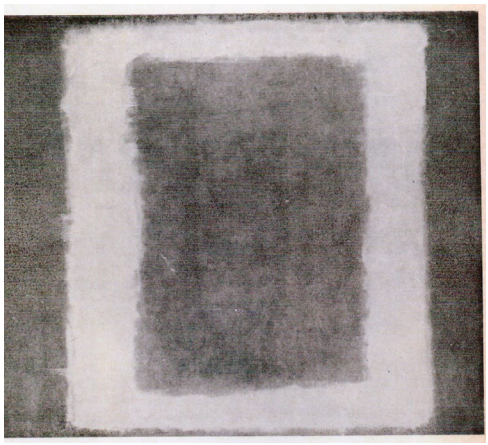
Tantric imagery and contemporary works of minimalism and conceptualism, before moving on to discuss certain works of early 20th century abstraction. Commenting on the work and writings of Carl André, Donald Judd and John Cage, amongst others, she suggests, 'The emphasis is on the absolutism of the object (Minimalists) or the specificity of experience (Process Art and Earthworks). The focus is on the immediate, the Now.'[12] She used the phrase 'via-media', suggesting its relationship both to certain aspects of ritual art, and also modern works which aim to change perception.[13] The essay stressed 'the reductive imagery of the *yantra* diagrams, negative language and the use of repetition'. [14] I find Whiles' observations to be compelling; her attention to the immediacy of the object and the alteration of perception affirm my own experiences with the material; her 'via-media' reflected in the concept of the performative image. She considered philosophical content as well as "pictorial affinities" and provided an informed introduction to both the imagery and the philosophy of *tantra*, which was lacking in Mookerjee, and over-sexualised by Philip Rawson in his introductory essay to the publication that accompanied the Hayward show. Despite arguing her case quite convincingly, she was hesitant in drawing too close a comparison,

> Similarities in form suggest comparisons in content. However, to correlate elements of Tantric philosophy with certain metaphysical preoccupations in 20th century western

12 Whiles, 1971, p. 102

13 Whiles, 1971, p. 103

14 Whiles, 1971, p. 102



Figs. 15 and 16, Original images from Virginia While's 1971 Studio International article, *Tantric Imagery: affinities with twentieth-century abstract art*. Right: Anonymous tantric image, 17th c. Rajasthan; left, black and white reproduction of Mark Rothko, 'Sketch for Mural No: 1', 1958, Oil on canvas, 105 x 120 in. The tantric work on paper has remained pinned to my wall over the years.

> abstract art is dubious, simply because of the fundamental differences in the aims and environments of two creative languages.[15]

Nevertheless, Whiles' essay initiated discussion, and her ideas were taken forward by Rawson in his 1973 publication *The Art of Tantra*, and in 1975 by Mookerjee in *Yoga Art*. Where Whiles' finds thought-provoking similarities with western art, Rawson is dismissive of the 'vapid conceptualism', which he suggests modern artists are 'groping their way through'.[16] Mookerjee cites works by Kandinsky, Klee and Rothko, and drew on his experience as director of the Museum of Folk Art in New Delhi by introducing archetypal imagery, magic symbols, and including traditional works from several other cultures.[17] He referenced images pertaining to early European alchemy and esotericism, and cryptically quoted from Plotinus, Dionysius the Areopagite, Jacob Boeme in an attempt to give easier access to the western reader/viewer, or in his words, 'Non-Indians who wish to reach direct experience of "the One"'.[18]

Revisiting her original *Studio International* article in 2015, Whiles wondered whether she had been too dismissive of connections. 'On re-reading my article, I find the correspondences credible and wonder why I held them so much in check.' She reflects that it may have been due

15 Whiles, 1971, p. 100

16 Philip Rawson, *The Art of Tantra*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2010 (1973), p. 64

17 Mookerjee, 1975, p. 153-206

18 Philip Rawson, *Tantra*, (exhibition catalogue) Hayward Gallery, London, 1971

to the contemporary zeitgeist, in which the discipline of Fine Art remained 'Western-centric' with 'intercultural dialogues still hovering on the horizon'.[19]

My discussion of western abstraction, which is detailed in chapter 6, aims to shed a different light on possible affinities while acknowledging the critical role played by Whiles. Her attention to 'via-media', reductive imagery, negative language and repetition are key elements which have recurred in my own investigations. Simply seeing the images of *tantra* and those of western abstraction side by side in her original essay was remarkable, and while Mookerjee's comparisons seem outdated, Whiles' work still reads well today.

Rawson's curation of the Hayward exhibition was unusually experiential. It provided an interesting reflection of the ritualistic, practical nature of *tantra* and the performative quality of the artifacts, which have an essentially ritualistic purpose. But despite the undoubted importance of Rawson's contribution to the dissemination of tantric imagery to western audiences, I find it difficult to get beyond his overt over-sexualisation of the subject, which influenced its understanding throughout the following decades. Describing this in a recent publication with Delhi Art Gallery, Madhu Khanna observes, 'A complex philosophy was reduced to bazaar naivete in the ensuing popular culture.'[20] Unfortunately, this naivete persisted, and even the more recent exhibition at the British Museum, 'Tantra: Enlightenment to Revolution', was heralded in the British press under the headline 'Sex please, we're the British Museum'.[21]

2. 1. 2 *Franck André Jamme and Tantra Song*

Mookerjee and Khanna's publications remained the only accessible source of the simple tantric abstractions until the French poet Franck André Jamme began exhibiting his collections in the late 1980s. Jamme's obsession to discover more about the imagery led to several trips to Rajasthan, where, by way of misfortune and serendipity, he finally gained access to several painter family groups. The painters informed him that these 'small paintings' originated in 17th century manuscripts or *Tantras*, and have been copied through the following centuries by small family groups of initiates.[22] He suggests that it then took him 'ten years to begin to know something, even if only a tiny something, about this amazing art.'[23]

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19 Virginia Whiles, 'Reflections on Tantric Imagery and Affinities with Twentieth Century Abstract Art', in Rebecca Heald (ed.), *Thinking Tantra*, The Drawing Room, London, 2016, p. 40

20 Madhu Khanna, *Tantra: on the Edge*, Delhi Art Gallery, Delhi, 2022, p. 23

21 The Guardian, 23rd January 2022

22 Franck André Jamme, *Tantra Song.* Los Angeles, Siglio, 2011, p. 14

23 Jamme, 2011, p. 14

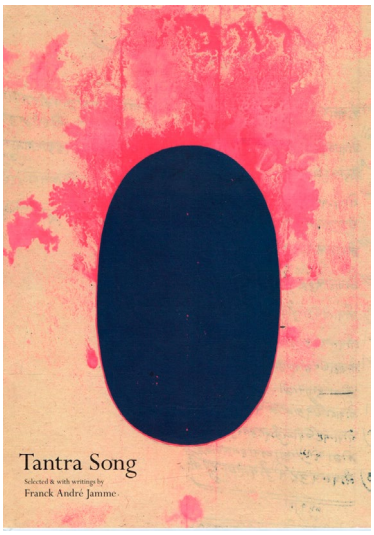

Fig. 17, Cover Image, *Tantra Song*, Franck André Jamme, 2011

His collections, as well as those of Jean-Claude Ciancimino and Joost van den Bergh, have formed the basis of a number of exhibitions, including 'Nineteen Tantric Paintings' in Paris,1994, 'Field of Color: Tantra Drawings from India', at The Drawing Center, New York in 2004, and 'Thinking Tantra' at The Drawing Room, London, in 2016. Lawrence Rinder discovered Jamme's collections at the 1994 Paris exhibition, and later, while director of the Californian Institute of Arts and Crafts in San Francisco, he included several of these small images on paper in his 1999 exhibition 'Searchlight: Consciousness at the Millennium', using them like moments of punctuation between more contemporary works.

Jamme's 2011 publication, *Tantra Song,* presented images from his collections and provided my first experience of the black ovoids of the Śiva *liṅga* paintings.[24] *Śāligrāma* and other small abstract images floated in the space of their pasted layers of often recycled *vasli* papers, not edited or truncated as I had seen them previously, but complete, as they were supposed to be seen. Rough edges and blemishes added to their strange beauty. Lawrence Rinder suggests that the images 'are in some sense technical', and explains, '[They] have a use in that tradition which is tool-like and, in some spiritual way, pragmatic. …The simplicity of their conventional, geometric forms is complemented by the infinite complexity of their particular execution.'[25]

In his introduction to the 1994 Paris Exhibition, Jamme touches on the interesting question of beauty and aesthetics in relation to the images:

> At times, in Europe as well as in India, one is warned that basically these pieces are tools of interior development and that it would be inappropriate to expose them too much in galleries and museums, or to associate them too explicitly with aesthetics.…Perhaps we are wrong when we speak of beauty since it seems to us that these paintings evoke, quite simply, truth. In their very abstraction they reveal themselves as sorts of represented thoughts – strange thoughts that choose, in place of words, to express themselves in form and colour.[26]

24 Jamme, 2011

25 Lawrence Rinder, Introduction in Jamme, 2011, p. 8

26 Franck André Jamme, *Nineteen Tantric Paintings* (exhibition catalogue), Gallery du Jour, Paris, 1994

While acknowledging that these paintings are essentially 'tools of inner practice', Jamme also points out that the tradition has always considered beauty as 'a reflection of the Divine'.[27] André Padoux comments that in India 'the aesthetic and the metaphysical or religious experiences tend often to coincide.'[28] Jamme's collections have provided valuable material for the practical research, while his poetic sensibility and Rinder's visual acuity bring a refreshing openness to the subject. Although neither Jamme nor Rinder proclaim a deep knowledge of these works, both describing themselves as amateurs, their reflections and commentaries are refreshingly authentic. Jamme's poetic descriptions of his collections were of value to the research because they are grounded in personal experience of the works. Both Jamme and Rinder insist on their western outsider positioning, while providing the most insightful commentary on the imagery. While working I kept in mind Jamme's statement that he simply lives with an image for a while, pins it above his desk so that it gradually pervades his senses.[29]

2. 1. 3 *Images from the Mehrangarh Fort Collections*

While the black ovoid of the Śiva *liṅga* provides an image of the image-less, formless Absolute, a very different approach to the depiction of the Absolute is seen within the paintings of the Royal Court of Jodhpur, a collection housed at the Mehrangarh Fort Museum. These images were virtually unknown until they were exhibited at the Smithsonian in 2008,[30] and the British Museum in 2009, in an exhibition entitled 'Garden and Cosmos'. This was an exhibition of two halves, as the title suggests, and the second part, Cosmos, included several paintings made under the patronage of Maharajah Man Singh (1803–1843), who broke from the traditional Krṣṇa practices of his ancestors to follow the Nath sect of tantric Saivite practitioners. He assembled a school of painters who worked directly with the Nath yogis to create an extraordinary collection of large-scale images. Both the *Nath Charit* and *Śiva Purāṇa* folios include images of the birth of the cosmos and the depiction of the Absolute, Brahman, that without name and form. Debra Diamond co-curated the original Smithsonian exhibition, and edited the accompanying text. She says of this group of paintings:

> South Asian artists rarely attempted to represent Brahman. Instead, they focused on depicting deities with knowable forms who served as accessible intermediaries or portals to the Absolute for worshipers. Man Singh's artists, however, rose to the challenge of conveying the undifferentiated and self-luminous Brahman. They evoked the Absolute with solid fields of shimmering gold pigment, creating paintings that were paradoxically

27 Jamme, 2011, p. 101

28 André Padoux, in Jamme, 2011, p. 10

29 Jamme, 2011, p. 15

30 Shown at the Arthur Sackville Gallery, Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC, Oct 2008 - Jan 2009

Fig. 18, 'Three Aspects of the Absolute', Folio 1 *Nath Carit*, Bulaki, 1823
Mehrangarh Museum Trust (with permissions)

both luxurious and immaterial. The abstraction epitomizes the atelier's aesthetic of the sublime.[31]

Rachel Aspen's review of the exhibition reads, 'His [Man Singh's] beliefs forced Marwari painting to grapple with nothing less than the mysteries underpinning the universe.'[32] Attending this exhibition and experiencing the paintings directly provided an exemplary example of the 'aesthetic shock' described by Coomaraswamy. Coming across these stark images after an immersion in the extraordinary complexity of the 'Garden' section of the exhibition, I was stopped in my tracks – the images had a physical effect, I felt uplifted. These are large paintings, their size and simplicity stunning. I wanted to immerse myself in their presence, and went back to the exhibition several times, just to experience this sensation. The exhibition and its accompanying publication inspired a field trip to the Mehrangarh Fort Museum in Jodhpur, where I was able to view the two images illustrated here from the museum's reserve collections.

'Three Aspects of the Absolute' (fig. 18) is an illustration to the *Nath Charit*, painted by the artist Bulaki.[33] A second painting, part of the *Śiva Purāṇa* folio, and referred to by Diamond as 'The Emergence of Spirit and Matter' (fig. 19), was made some five years later. It is attributed to Shivdas, although in this case there is no confirmation on the reverse. While drawing heavily on Bulaki's style, the painting lacks the refinement of his line, though its originality and presence remain. Made according to the instructions of the Nath spiritual teachers at the Jodhpur court,

31 Debra Diamond, in Debra Diamond (ed.), *Garden and Cosmos: The Royal Paintings of Jodhpur*, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, 2008, p. 173

32 Rachel Aspden, exhibition review in the *New Statesman*, 13th August, 2009

33 The inscription on the reverse of the painting reads, 'Glorious *Nath Charit*! Entered into the *dholiya* [storeroom]. The painter Bulaki and others made it.'

Fig. 19, 'Creation of the Cosmic Ocean and the Elements', Folio 3, *Śiva Purāṇa*, Shivdas, 1828
Mehrangarh Fort Collections (with permissions)

these paintings produced a completely unique imagery.[34] When observing 'Three Aspects of the Absolute' (fig. 18) closely, it was clear that several changes had been made. These were not the usual copies of existing imagery, often traced from a prototype, but the work of an individual artist, slowly working his way towards a solution. The central figure had been moved, changed, as the work progressed. Indian art historian B. K. Goswamy points out, 'The painter of this stunningly daring work seems to have gone where not many had gone before him.'[35]

It is interesting to consider whether the painters of the Jodhpur Court may have looked back to Manaku's 'Hiraṇyagarbha' for illumination. Painted some 80 years earlier, this more traditional sized painting also uses gold and the patterning of primordial waters to express the beginnings of things, and is similarly unique. Here again it is as if the artist were playing with ideas. Goswamy says of Manaku, 'He must have struggled to come to terms with the thoughts behind the concept'.[36] It seems that because of that struggle, these images have risen above the excellence of their traditional roots to create something universally understood and appreciated. This is of specific interest when considering the role of copying an original and the inventiveness of the individual painter. Very little is known about the movement of artists at the time, but, unlike the usual Rajput tradition of family groups of painters, Man Singh attracted painters from various traditions and locations to his atelier. Bulaki was known as 'the Muslim', and had previously attended the Mughal courts.[37] His work may be the most delicate and yet the most audacious in the Fort Museum collections, but to what extent was he, as a Muslim, able to respond to the Nath tantric teachings? And is it possible that the very abstract nature of the work allowed this

34 B. K. Goswamy, *The Spirit of Indian Painting*, Thames and Hudson, New Delhi, 2016, p. 269; Diamond, in Diamond (ed.), 2008, p. 174

35 Goswamy, 2016, p. 269

36 Goswamy, 2016, p. 127

37 Diamond, in Diamond (ed.), 2008, p. 322

response? As the subject matter draws closer to the origin of things, closer to the formless, is it more likely to be shared across cultures and spiritual disciplines?

The 'Hiraṇyagarbha' and the Jodhpur depictions of the Absolute and cosmogenesis concluded the image search. Having defined the basic types of images to be studied, the *yantra*, the Śiva *liṅga* and *śāligrāma*, the depictions of the Absolute and cosmogenesis, and in order to place my own work within a more contemporary setting, I looked into the work of more contemporary artists who claim a tantric influence. I attended exhibitions, looked through publications, consulted the work of curators. Most of the work I encountered was disappointing.

2. 2 *Contemporary Tantric Art*

The 2020 British Museum 'Tantra' exhibition included a collection of *tantra*-inspired artworks from the 1960s to the present. As well as the original poster for the Hayward exhibition (fig: 13), there were several other psychedelic-countercultural event posters and record covers from the 1960s and 70s. Several works were included from the 'Neo-Tantric' group of Indian painters,[38] including the semi-abstract, semi-erotic images by Rasool Santosh, an adherent of Kashmir Saivism (figs. 20, 21),[39] and the brightly coloured *maṇḍala/yantra* inspired acrylics on canvas by Biren De. Works by Penny Slinger, Bharti Kair and Chritapa Baswas reflected the feminist slant of the exhibition, and the three artists later took part in an online discussion, 'Exploring the Art of Tantra Today',[40] chaired by Rebecca Heald. Slinger introduced her early work, which suggested a yoga/goddess/chakra vision based on the Mookerjee chakra imagery, as 'a feminist approach to surrealism'. The two British Asian women, Kair and Baswas, gave nuanced presentations of their predominantly sculptural work, which was both striking and powerful, applying their understanding of *tantra* to their current experience as women, both in India and the UK. This was fascinating, but not within the remit of my study.

The Neo-Tantric group of painters was explored in detail through Madhu Khanna's collaboration with the Delhi Art Gallery (DAG) on their exhibition 'Tantra on the Edge: Inspirations and Experimentations in Twentieth Century Indian Art'.[41] The exhibition was accompanied by an extensive publication, edited by Khanna, and in which Khanna describes her experience of the

38 The name 'Neo-Tantra' was originally conceived by L. P. Sihare for his 'Neo-Tantra: Contemporary Indian Painters inspired by Tradition', an exhibition held at the Frederick S. Wight Gallery, Los Angeles in 1985.

39 Imma Ramos (ed.), *Tantra: Enlightenment to Revolution*, (British Museum catalogue), Thames and Hudson, London 2020, p. 226

40 'Exploring the Art of Tantra Today', members talk, British Museum, 21st January 2021

41 Madhu Khanna (curator), 'Tantra on the Edge: Inspirations and Experimentations in Twentieth Century Indian Art,' Delhi Art Gallery, New Delhi, 2023

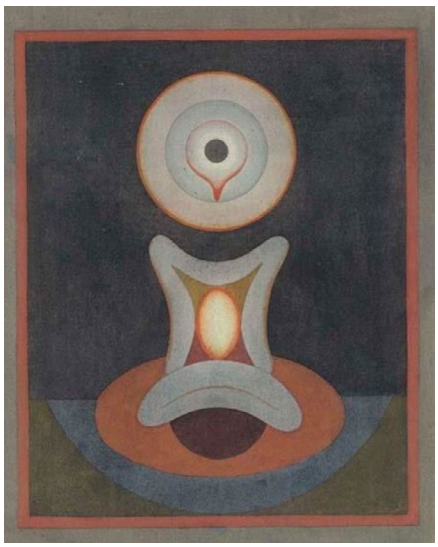

Fig. 20, Rasool Santosh, Untitled, 1970s
Acrylic on paper,
after *Tantra*, British Museum, 2020, p. 224

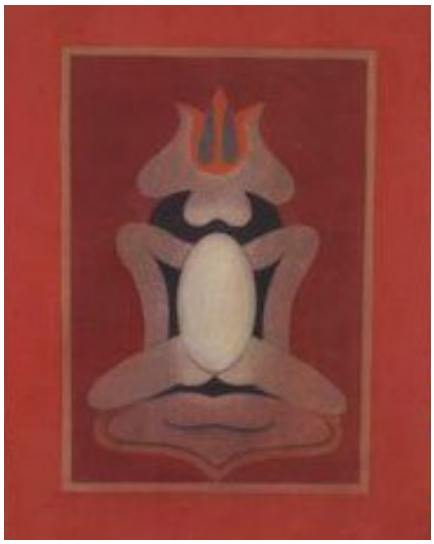

Fig. 21, Rasool Santosh, Untitled, 1970s
Acrylic on paper,
after *Tantra*, British Museum, 2020, p. 214

reception of *tantra* and 'Tantric Art' in 1960s and 70s London. The exhibition included work by Haider Raza, possibly the most internationally recognised artist of the group. In 2023, Raza had a solo exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, accompanied by a small show of his work at the Musée Guimet.

During the 1960s, in reaction to the western domination of art schools in India, several painters began to look back into their own traditions.[42] Raza originally studied in Paris, claiming influence from Cezanne and later Mark Rothko, but he returned to his native Mewar, where, 'in response to an inner yoga practice', he developed his own hybrid style.[43] Yashodhara Dalmia says of Raza's work:

> Moving away from expressionism, he began exploring geometric forms, frequently centering on a solid black dot or Bindu. This concentrated point symbolized both the beginning and end of the cosmos from which all matter and life is generated, and into which it is eventually reabsorbed.[44]

While Raza's *bindu* paintings look interesting in reproduction, and sound fascinating when described, the images lack cohesion and sit uncomfortably within the square frame of his large

42 Yashodhara Dalmia describes how under British occupation art schools were established in the mid 19th c in Madras (1850), Calcutta (1954) and Bombay (1857) [sic.] after 'the South Kensington model', ie. based on the Royal College of Art, London. There was a sharp distinction made between art and craft (miniature painting being included as craft) and craft departments geared towards industry and export. Yashodhara Dalmia, *The Making of Modern Indian Art*, 2001 Oxford University Press, Delhi, p. 159, p. 3

43 Raza is Muslim by birth, so his work was more a reflection of his own yoga practices.

44 Dalmia, 2001, p. 159

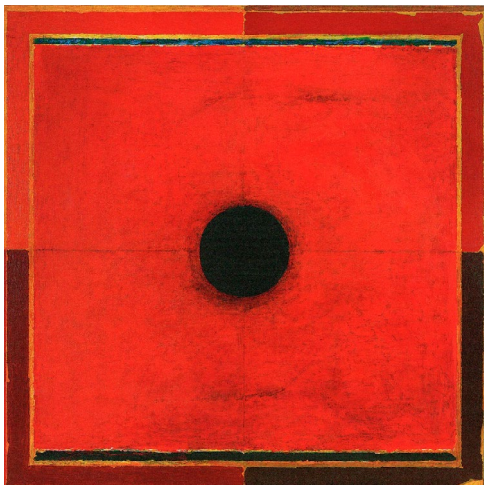

Fig. 22, Haider Raza, Bindu, 1984
Acrylic on canvas,
after *Tantra on the Edge*, p. 236

Fig. 23, Haider Raza, Nagas, 1997
Acrylic on canvas,
after *Tantra on the Edge*, p. 240

canvases. Viewing several of these Neo-Tantra works confirmed my feeling that this imagery should remain small, intimate, for close observation, not dissipated in large oil or acrylic surfaces which lose depth and subtlety.[45] With a few exceptions, this attempt to mix the modern and the traditional seems to lose sight of the intention of the original works, creating more chaos than cohesion, more noise than silence.

Rebecca Heald, who moderated the British Museum discussions, had previously curated 'Thinking Tantra' at the Drawing Room, London (2016-2017), an exhibition which brought together several 20th century and contemporary artists, British, Indian and American, who claimed the influence of tantric imagery on their predominantly abstract work. The catalogue of the exhibition includes writings from several of the artists with illustrations of their work, alongside some small anonymous works on paper from Rajasthan, drawn from the collections of Joost van den Bergh.[46] Included in this exhibition were the work and writings of Nicola Durvasula, which display a considered understanding of *tantra* and its connection to *mantra* and sound vibration.[47] Durvasula's work came to my attention while visiting the Alice Boner Centre in Varanasi, where she had undertaken an artist's residency, and a diary entry from that time conveys her musings on the breakdown of structure, and describes that form/no-form counterpoint: 'Would we enter a black hole, the pinhole of truth… remove all the layers and get to the heart of the 'MATTER' which is infinitesimally finite?'[48] Durvasula's work was

45 DAG Gallery, at Frieze Art Fair, London 2023

46 Rebecca Heald (ed.), *Thinking Tantra: Research Papers*, London, Drawing Room, 2016

47 Nicola Durvasula in Joost van den Berg (ed.), *Perfect Presence, Tantra, Jain and Ritual Art from India*, London, Joost van den Berg, 2019, p. 12 -13; Heald, 2016, p. 11

48 Nicola Durvasula, extract from notebook, quoted in Heald (ed.), 2016, p. 11 I have been fortunate to work with Nicola as advisor for the practical aspect of my work. See Appendix III.

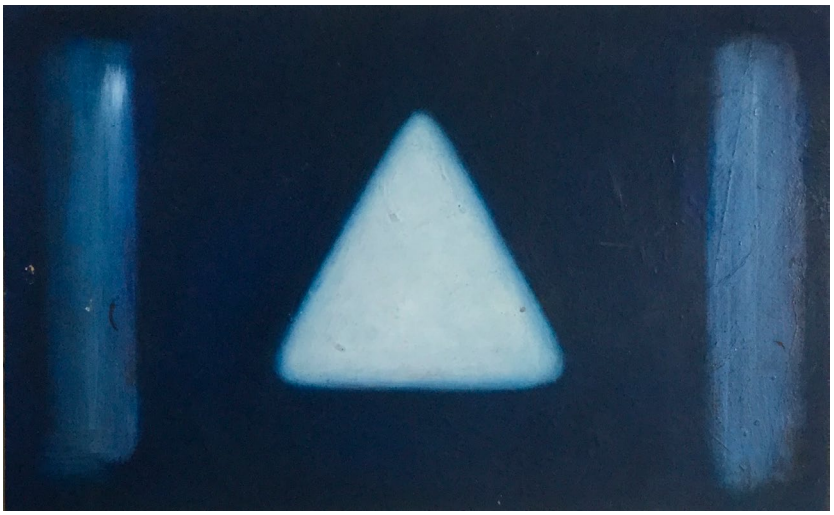

Fig. 24 Nicola Durvasula, Untitled, 1989

recently exhibited in a solo show at Joost van den Bergh, and also as part of the 'Beyond the Page' exhibition at the MK Gallery.[49]

The work of Acharya Ram Charan Sharma, usually known as 'Vyakul' or 'the crazy one', was also included in the 'Thinking Tantra' exhibition. His vibrant, uninhibited paintings are described by Shezad Dawood as dangerous: 'In fact it is this danger that marks Vyakul out as a true tantric practitioner and adept.'[50] Vyakul established the Museum of Indology in Jaipur to house both his collections of indigenous artifacts and his own interpretations of both *śāligrāma* and other tantric concepts. He was actively involved in tantric practices, and is reputed to have made his works in odd moments of inspiration, drawing on whatever materials he found on hand.[51] Franck André Jamme introduced Vyakul to both European and US audiences, by including his work in the 1989 'Magiciens de la Terre' exhibition at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, and later, in 1993, at Galerie du Jour: Angès b., Paris, and also at the John McEnroe gallery in New York.

The curators of Vyakul's 1994-1995 exhibition 'Thoughts in Colour and Line' ('Gedanken in Farben und Linien'), which toured several galleries in Germany, were interested in the ability of these Tantra-inspired works to speak across cultures: 'Through the language of artistic expression, even an observer from a different culture finds an intuitive access to Acharya Vyakul's transcriptions of thoughts and meditations.'[52] His small 'tantric abstractions' are difficult

49 'Beyond the Page: South Asian Miniature Painting and Britain, 1600 to Now', MK Gallery, Milton Keynes, October 2023-January 2024

50 Shezad Dawood, 'Open Circuit – Colour and Altered States', in Heald (ed.), 2015, p. 26

51 Heald, (ed.), 2015, p. 22, 26

52 Rene Block, Barbara Barsch, Iris Lenz, *Gedanken in Farben und Linien,* Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, Köln, 1994 (translation of the text made for the author by Dr. Michelle Bromley)

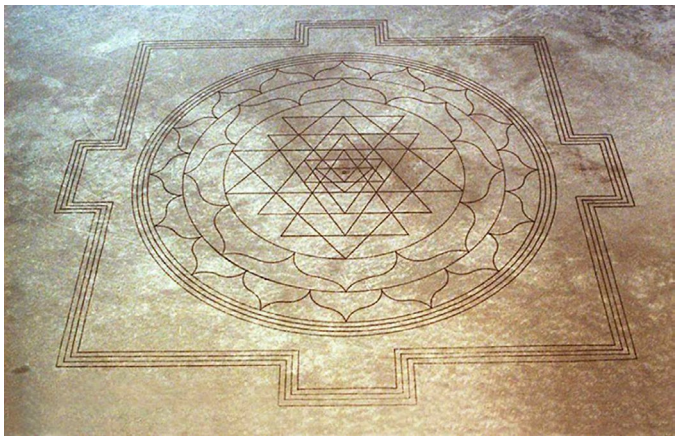

Fig. 27, Bill Witherspoon, *Śrīyantra,* 2004
Art as Technology, MIT Press

to define or categorize, but provide an interesting link between the traditional and the more contemporary 'personalized' visions of non-figurative tantric art.

The 'Thinking Tantra' exhibition also included smaller works on paper by members of the Indian 'Neo-Tantra' group, which were more successful than the large canvases, and seemed to be more in-keeping with the origins and intentions of these artifacts, confirming my feeling that they should remain small, intimate, close-up and personal.

In complete contrast, land artist Bill Witherspoon undertook the ambitious project to create a *śrīyantra* one quarter mile across in the Oregon desert (fig. 27). Originally published as an article with the title 'Art as Technology' by MIT Press,[53] he describes the effects of his project on both the land and the individuals involved, with the insistence that 'art is technology', and with the implication that these images are tools able to affect change. His focus is on 'consciousness changing'. In the same article Witherspoon discusses the effect of his *yantra* paintings on gallery goers, including groups of school children – whom he suggests may be most easily affected by the sometimes hidden *yantra* within the paintings:

> It also seems that observing a painting is the reciprocal of the creative process. That is, when we give attention to a painting, not only the information but also the consciousness embedded in that painting is recreated in the observers' awareness. This occurs through resonance or entrainment. …From the point of view of the artist (and the observer), a painting can be used as a device to structure consciousness, modify physiology and transmit information.[54]

53 Bill Witherspoon, 'Art and Technology', Leonardo Electronic Almanac, Vol 12, no. 6, June 2004, p. 12-13 (https://docplayer.net/39978015-Art-as-technology-by-bill-witherspoon.html)
54 Witherspoon, 2004, section IV

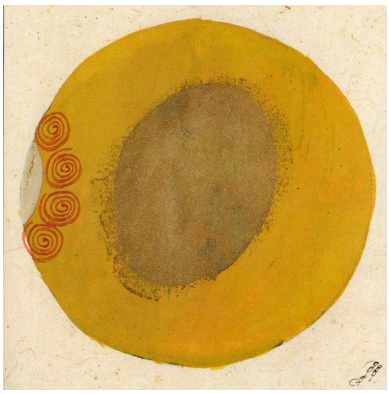

Fig. 25, Acharya Vyakul, Śāligrāma-śilā
'Lakshmi shaligrama', *Salagrama Puran*

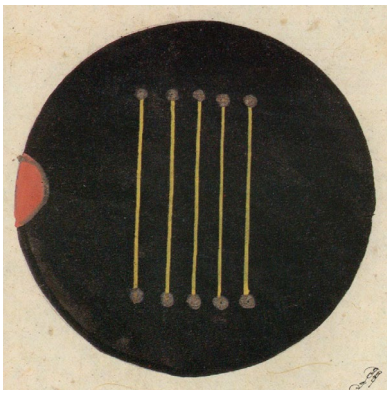

Fig. 26, Acharya Vyakul, Śāligrāma-śilā
'Laskhmi Narayana', *Salagrama Puran*

In different ways, Vyakul, Witherspoon and Durvasula are concerned with the aspects of tantric art which are most relevant to the current research; Witherspoon very specifically with the effect of the *yantra* on both consciousness and physical matter, Durvasula in her concern with sound, vibration, infinity, space and time, Vyakul by the pure energy and intention of his practice. While steeped in the classical texts, and informed by his own tantric practices, Vyakul insists that his work is the result of his own personal search.[55] In the introductory essay to the 1994 exhibition of his work, E. M. Schoo states,

> Vyakul's work seems to express primal powers and deepest interior worlds – detached from all rational deliberation. Vyakul speaks a language that we have forgotten, but which immediately becomes accessible to us again through his work.[56]

2. 3 *Approaching the subject of tantra*

As the imagery at the centre of the research was introduced to the western art world as 'Tantric Art', my initial intention was to discover more about *tantra* itself. It soon became apparent that the field is vast, interpretation contentious, and that labelling imagery as 'tantric' is problematic. But while it is beyond the scope of this research to explore the field of *tantra* in detail, the attempt to grasp something of the subject both challenged my assumptions and provided an essential depth to the investigation.

Etymologically, *tantra* is to weave, it is a thread, a warp. Its root, *tan*, is to expand, to spread out. It is also a method, a system, a theory, and has been used to define the esoteric traditions which

55 Private conversation with Anurag Sharma, Vyakul's son, Jaipur, 5th April 2023
56 Schoo, 1994, p. 10

arose in South Asia around 5th century C. E. In Hinduism, its texts are known as the *Tantras* and the *Agamas*.[57] André Padoux suggests that as well as the more esoteric, initiatory side of *tantra*, it has a much wider influence: 'To deal with Tantra is not merely to deal with some minority aspect of the Indian religiospiritual world; it is to deal with some of its fundamental traits.'[58] He considers *tantra* to be embedded within 'everything that became Hinduism from the fifth century CE onwards.'[59] And suggests that 'the extension in time and space, and the diversity of the tantric presence make it difficult to define and delimit.'[60] Similarly, Alvaro Enterria explains, 'Tantric concepts are so intricately woven into nearly every level of Hinduism that it is very difficult (and more often than not artificial) to separate the 'tantric' from the 'non-tantric'.[61]

The early translator of tantric texts, John Woodroffe, points out that *tantra* is interwoven in all aspects of Hindu ritual life:

> Mediaeval Hinduism (to use a convenient if somewhat vague term) was, as its successor modern Indian orthodoxy is, largely Tantric. The Tantra was then, as it is now, the great Mantra and Sādhanā Shāstra (Scripture), and the main, where not the sole, source of some of the fundamental concepts still prevalent as regards worship, images, initiation, yoga, the supremacy of the guru and so forth.[62]

In the early 1900s, Woodroffe, often under the pseudonym Arthur Avalon, pioneered translation of tantric literature into the English language. Assisted by his Sanskrit teachers, and aided by his social status, he gave the subject a degree of academic credibility previously lacking. His research was respected amongst both westerners and the often English public school-educated, mostly Bengali, Indians in 1910s and 20s Calcutta, where Woodroffe served as a judge.[63] His work was applauded by Aurobindo Ghose (another western-educated Bengali) in the introductory pages of his *Foundations of Indian Culture,* which was originally published as a series of essays between 1918 and 1921.[64] Woodroffe had close ties with the Tagore family and co-founded the

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57 The Sanskrit term *tantra* has an interesting similarity to the Chinese term *jing* (經) which means a warp, a thread, and is also used to denote a revealed text (such as the *Daode jing*). It is used to translate the Sanskrit *sutra* in Buddhist texts.

58 Padoux, 2017, p. xv

59 Padoux, 2017, p. 144

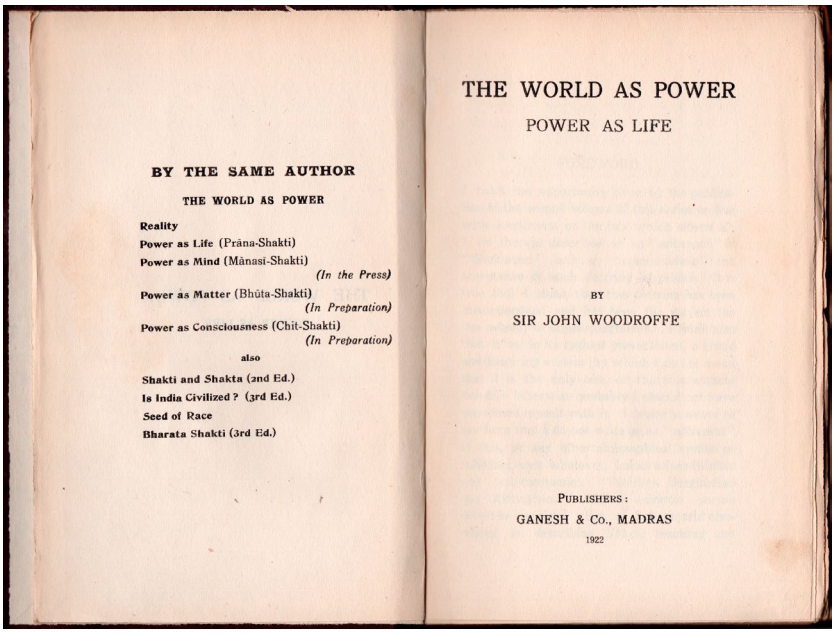
60 Padoux, 2017, p. 4

61 Alvaro Enterria, *India from Within: A Guide to India's History, Religion, Culture and Society*, Indica Books, Varanasi, 2010, p. 202

62 Padoux, 2017, p. 6. Quoted from the Preface of Woodroffe's 1913 text, *The Principles of Tantra*.

63 Kathleen Taylor, *Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra and Bengal: 'An Indian Soul in a European Body?'*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxford, p. 37-41

64 Sri Aurobindo, *Foundations of Indian Culture*, Pondicherry, All India Books, 1971 p.1 [originally published as a series of articles 1918-1921]


BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE WORLD AS POWER

Reality
Power as Life (Prāna-Shakti)
Power as Mind (Mānasi-Shakti)
(In the Press)
Power as Matter (Bhūta-Shakti)
(In Preparation)
Power as Consciousness (Chit-Shakti)
(In Preparation)

also

Shakti and Shakta (2nd Ed.)
Is India Civilized? (3rd Ed.)
Seed of Race
Bharata Shakti (3rd Ed.)

THE WORLD AS POWER

POWER AS LIFE

BY

SIR JOHN WOODROFFE

PUBLISHERS:
GANESH & Co., MADRAS
1922

Figs. 28, Original edition of Woodroffe's *The World as Power: Power as Life,* Published by Ganesh and Co, Madras, 1922. Author's copy.

Indian Society of Oriental Art.[65] His wife's close friendship with Annie Besant, and the couple's connections with the Theosophical Society,[66] suggest that his work would have been known to early European abstractionists, particularly to Mondrian and Kandinsky, who were both members of Theosophical groups.[67] (This is discussed further in chapter 6.)

As seen in the above quotation, Woodroffe emphasises that the texts of *tantra* underlie most ritual practice, or *sādhanā*, within Hinduism. He introduced a modern western scientific perspective to the study of Indian cosmology, by drawing on Einstein's relativity theory and incorporating concepts of time/space–energy/matter continuity into the discussion of Indian philosophical and metaphysical concepts.[68] With collaborators such as Professor Mukhyopadhyay, he employed the language of theoretical physics to make abstract ideas more palatable to an English speaking audience. Woodroffe stressed the very practical and experiential nature of Indian thinking, stating, 'In order to understand reality we must experience it directly.' And later, 'We must experience reality and not merely discuss it.'[69] He also suggests, 'Indian thought affirms the truth of experience whether empirical or transcendental.'[70] Woodroffe's stress on the

65 Taylor, 2001, p. 37

66 Taylor, 2001, p. 43-45

67 Louis Veen, *Piet Mondrian, The Complete Writings*, Leiden, Primavera Pres, 2017, pp. 27-29; Frank Witford, *Kandinsky*, London, Paul Hamlyn, 1967, p. 16

68 See, for example, Sri Aurobindo's Introduction to his *Foundations of Indian Culture*, Pondicherry, All India Press, 1971, and Taylor, 2001

69 Woodroffe, 1921, p. 24-25

70 Woodroffe, 1921, p. 24

practical and the experiential provided the thread which pulled together the diverse strands of *tantra* and the complexities of its translation and interpretation.

Within academia, there is inevitably much debate and dissension on the subject. Agehananda Bharati, author of the much quoted and referenced *The Tantric Tradition*, describes Woodroffe as an 'enthusiastic promoter' of the study of *tantra*, and continues, 'Although his work can hardly stand scholarly scrutiny …it was nevertheless instrumental in making tantrism and tantric studies respectable.'[71] But Bharati is criticized by Padoux, who includes him in his critique of 'Western deracinated transpositions'.[72] According to Muller-Ortega, 'One must be rather careful in accepting many of his [Woodroffe's] conclusions.'[73] In his *Triadic Heart of Shiva*, Muller-Ortega approaches the teachings of 12th century Kashmiri Saivist Abhinavagupta, and draws together much interesting information and reference material in his introduction to the text.[74] But, according to Alexis Sanderson, 'This is a brave attempt to make sense of difficult materials. But also a somewhat foolhardy one, as the author's Sanskrit is not yet ready for it.'[75] Sanderson suggests that much ritual evidence has been 'overlooked by Indology', he continues: 'This is particularly so in the case of the Saivism of Kashmir, where scholarship has concentrated on its mystical and metaphysical elements, and not at all, or with much less precision, on the ritual and social organization which are their substrate.'[76] David Gordon White, who worked as an assistant to Mircea Eliade while researching his PhD at Chicago University, has a prodigious output on yoga and tantrism, but while asserting his 'prominence in the field of yoga and *tantra*', James Mallinson of SOAS criticizes his research methodology, which is 'not as deeply rooted in textual criticism as that of the current vanguard of scholars working on *tantra* and *yoga*'.[77] Sthanesthar Timalsina of the University of California, San Diego, suggests that a unitary understanding of *tantra* is very difficult to achieve and 'continues to elude western scholars'.[78]

But despite these difficulties and disagreements between scholars, it is generally agreed that tantrism is more inclusive and accessible than the more orthodox Brahmanical traditions, and there is an acceptance of its experiential, practical nature. According to Bharati, 'It is defined

71 Agehananda Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition*, New York, Samuel Weiser, 1975, p. 9

72 Padoux, 2017, p. 176

73 Paul Muller-Ortega, *The Triadic Heart of Shiva*, SUNY Press, New York, 1989, p. 48

74 Muller-Ortega, 1989

75 Alexis Sanderson, 'Book Review of The Triadic Heart of Shiva', *The Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol 53, no. 2, p. 355

76 Alexis Sanderson, *Meaning in Tantric Ritual*, Tantra Foundation, New Delhi, 2006, p. 15

77 James Mallinson, *The Yogis' Latest Trick,* (a review of David Gordon White's *Sinister Yogis*), published online by Cambridge University Press, 03 12 2013 (https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186313000734)

78 Sthaneshwar Timalsina, *Tantric Visual Culture: A Cognitive Approach,* New York, Routledge, 2017, p.2

more by practice than belief.'[79] This seems to be the consistent thread which binds the tantric traditions, and which Eliade calls: 'the markedly experiential character of tantrism.'[80]

Emission and reabsorption

This experiential nature of *tantra* is discussed by Richard Davis in his study of ritual practices within southern Śaiva Siddhānta, *Ritual in an Oscillating Universe*: *Worshiping Śiva in Medieval India.* Davis introduces the central premise of this ritual practice with a more general statement:

> 'The universe oscillates. It comes and goes, emerges and disappears. This is a basic cosmological tenet for many schools of Hindu thought: the universe as we know it undergoes an endless cycle of creations and destructions. …In this way, our universe oscillates between moments of creation and destruction, evolution and involution, activity and quietude, expansion and contraction.'[81]

He explains that for Śaivas, these cycles are not confined to 'cosmogonic motion' but reflect the 'ubiquitous principle of a dynamic universe,' which is the constant activity of Śiva to 'animate the cosmos'.[82] This dynamic activity of creation, maintenance and destruction is beautifully depicted in the iconic image of Naṭarāja, the dancing Śiva, which was originally created in the Chola centre of Śaiva Siddhānta, Thanjavur. Davis explains: 'Śaiva daily worship also echoes the rhythm of the oscillating universe. …the Śaiva worshiper repeatedly enacts in his ritual performance the motions of emission (*sṛṣṭi*) and reabsorption (*samhāra*).'[83] The path of emission, or emanation, denotes the movement from the formless Absolute to the manifest world, that of reabsorption, the movement from the diversity of form back to formlessness – 'it reinstates the unity lost through differentiation'.[84]

Davis' descriptions of these ritual practices, and explanation of emission and reabsorption are reflected in Khanna's study of the ritual associated with the *śrīyantra,* and became an important source of understanding when working on the making of *yantra*. Davis also explains the vital interconnections between the concepts of knowledge (*jñāna*) and action (*kriyā*) within Śaiva Siddhānta, which seemed to be reflected within the research process, and particularly in the ritualistic making of the *yantra*. Davis describes this inseparability:

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79 Bharati, 1975, p. 20

80 Mircea Eliade, *Yoga Immortality and Freedom,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2009, (1959) p. 234

81 Richard H. Davis, *Ritual in an Oscillating Universe*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1991, p. 42

82 Davis, 1991, p. 42

83 Davis, 1991, p. 42

84 Davis, 1991, p. 43

> I began to see that Śaiva texts envision a world – *the* world, they would say – in which the capacities of humans to know about the world and to act within it are two interrelated modalities of a unitary power of consciousness. …Consciousness, in turn, manifests itself through two primary powers: the power to know (*jñānaśakti*) and the power to act (*kriyāśakti*). Yet these two powers are not fundamentally distinct.[85]

Davis continues: 'The Śaiva philosophers themselves speak of the division between knowing and acting as only an "apparent" dichotomy of a fundamentally unified human capacity of consciousness.'[86] Within this context, 'action' is essentially ritual action, and Davis explains, 'The *pūjā* [daily act of ritual worship] acts as a virtual précis of Śaiva Siddhānta theology, a daily catechism in action for worshipers who undertake it with diligence and mindfulness.'[87] It became clear when working practically with sacred imagery that the act of its making often followed ritual processes which similarly acted as a 'précis' of theology. The concepts of emission and reabsorption are intrinsic to the *yantra*, and are reflected in its making.

While acknowledging the difficulty in coming to terms with the details and intricacies of *tantra*, the texts cited above and online study with the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies have provided grounding to the research.[88] The more I studied the subject, the more I understood the limitation of my knowledge. Nevertheless, Gavin Flood and André Padoux provided clear and enlightening introductions, while the doctoral research projects of both Richard Davis and Madhu Khanna gave insight into the ritual practices which relate directly to the images studied. This will be considered more fully in the next section. While acknowledging the inevitable limitations of my study in this area, understanding the essentially practical, ritualistic nature of *tantra* was fundamental to the application of this textual research to the making of images. I turn in summary back to Padoux:

> [Tantra] is a vast and fascinating universe to be grasped and understood as a whole. Tantric traditions share the same vast pantheon in different ways. With different cosmologies, they have a common view of the cosmos as a locus of powers both human and divine, these powers pervading and animating the universe while being grounded in a totally transcendent – but omnipresent – Absolute.[89]

85 Davis, 1991, p. xi

86 Davis, 1991, p. xii

87 Davis, 1991, p. 3

88 Online study course in 'Tantric Theology' with Gavin Flood, Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, February - April 2023

89 Padoux, 2017, p. 175

Fig. 29, *Śrīyantra,* cover image, Zimmer, 1986

2. 4 *Placing the imagery within philosophical and ritual contexts*

In this section I will discuss the readings that were most informative in developing background knowledge of the images studied. Where possible and most appropriate I have accessed primary sources in translation. As the study progressed, the *śrīyantra* gained importance, and the practical work began to mirror the journey through the *yantra*, through the central *bindu*, towards the reabsorption into the Absolute, represented by the *liṅga*. This was followed by the process of emission or cosmogenesis, referencing *hiraṇyagarbha*.

2. 4. 1 *Yantra*

Heinrich Zimmer's *Artistic Form and Yoga in the Sacred Images of India* provides a comprehensive discussion of both *yantra* and the geometry underlying much of Indian sacred imagery, which he suggests is an important part of its aesthetic appeal.[90] Zimmer observes an aura of tranquillity, stillness and silence around Indian sculpture, which he contrasts to classical European art's concern with movement and engagement.[91] Zimmer's text provided much of the early information on *yantra*. It was published in German in 1926, and drew heavily on the writings of Woodroffe,[92] but it was not translated into English until several decades later. Zimmer's text was known to Eliade, who quotes Zimmer in several places in what was originally his PhD dissertation, later published as *Yoga, Immortality and Freedom.*[93] The book devotes a section to *yantra* and *maṇḍala,* but brings together imagery from Hinduism, Jainism and

90 Zimmer, 1984, p. 4 In depth studies of the geometry underlying temple construction, temple sculpture, and sacred painting have been made by Stella Kramrisch, and carried forward by Alice Boner. Their work shows that an underlying geometry informs all aspects of sacred art in India. See, for example, Stella Kramrisch, *Exploring India's Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch*, Indira Ghandi Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1983; Alice Boner, *Vastusūtra Upaniṣad: The Essence of form in Sacred Art,* Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 2000

91 Zimmer, 1984, p. 9

92 See, for example, Zimmer, 1984, pp. 23-24

93 Mircea Eliade, *Yoga, Immortality and Freedom*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, [1954] 2009, pp. 219-227. Eliade's PhD was completed in 1933 (after prolonged study with Dasgupta at The University of Calcutta, and several

Buddhism, and concludes with a few paragraphs on Jung's use of the *maṇḍala,* in the eclectic way that Eliade's study was to progress. Zimmer's study of Indian imagery added to C. G. Jung's interest in *maṇḍala*. Jung made comparisons with his own drawings and those of his patients, developing these ideas into a map for psychological integration and individuation, which in turn contributed to the dissemination of *maṇḍala* imagery in the West. Padoux suggests that while Jung's interpretations may have been useful therapeutically, they were '"Indologically" mistaken and contributed noticeably to misconceptions.'[94] Guiseppe Tucci's 1961 publication, *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala*, drew heavily on Jung's 'Modern Psychology of the Unconscious' and concentrated on Tibetan *maṇḍala*. His work may have added to Padoux's perceived misconceptions.[95] Zimmer discusses both the meaning and construction of *śrīcakra* (*śrīyantra),* but Khanna suggests, 'Zimmer's account is inspired by connoisseurship and lacks a critical voice or method. …He de-contextualizes the *śrīcakra* from its doctrine and liturgy.'[96] While acknowledging what Khanna considered as short-comings, and despite its archaic language, Zimmer's text laid the groundwork for further research, and was referenced throughout the research process.

Śrīyantra and the Kāmakalā-vilāsa

The *śrīyantra* is mentioned in the 11th verse of Ādi Śaṅkāra's *Saundarayalaharī* and the commentary on this verse by Kaivalyāśrama is the most frequently cited source for its construction. Professor Ramachandra Rao has published several small texts on *yantra* and specifically on the *śrīyantra*, or *śrīcakra*, which provide comprehensive explanations of varying methods for construction, citing textual sources.[97] His later publication, *The Tantric Practices in Śrī Vidyā*,[98] draws on the South Indian Śrī Vidyā text the *Śāradā-Catuśśatila,* and gives a practical guide to the rituals of *śrīcakra*. Rao stresses the *śrīcakra* as the *yantra* of Lalitā or Tripurasundarī, the Devatā of Śrī Vidyā, while Padoux discusses its earlier use within Kashmir Saivism.[99] Madhu Khanna's PhD dissertation is focused specifically on the ritual and liturgy of *śrīcakra,* primarily through the works of Śivananda of the Hādimata school of the cult of Tripurasundarī.[100] Her work is hailed

stints in the Sivananda ashram in Rishikesh) and later became the basis of his text on Yoga, which was not published until 1954, initially in Paris.

94 Padoux, 2017, p. 167

95 Guiseppe Tucci, *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala*: *with Special Reference to the Modern Psychology of the Unconscious*, Dover Publications, 2001 (Rider and Co, London, 1961)

96 Khanna, 1986, p. 14

97 S. K. Ramachandra Rao, *The Tantra of Sri Chakra*, 1983; *The Yantras,* Indian Books Centre, New Delhi, 1988

98 S. K. Ramachandra Rao, *The Tantric Practices in Śri-Vidyā,* Indian Books Centre, New Delhi, 2005 (1990)

99 Andre Padoux, 'The Śrīcakra according to the first chapter of the Yoginīhrdaya', in Gudrun Bühnemann (ed.), *Maṇḍalas and Yantras in the Hindu Traditions*, D. K. Printworld, New Delhi, 2007

100 Madhu Khanna, T*he Concept and Liturgy of the Śrīcakra based on Śivānanda's Trilogy*, PhD dissertation, Weston College, Oxford University, 1986

by Padoux as the most thorough exposition of the subject, 'rooting the *śrīcakra* within Kashmiri Śaivite doctrine'.[101] Her study takes the reader on a journey through the *śrīcakra*, often using the text of the *Kāmakalā-vilāsa* as a guide.

The *Kāmakalā-vilāsa* is a text of Śrī Vidyā, which describes the activity of the goddess (Devī) through the imagery of *śrīcakra.*[102] Khanna explains, 'The triadic categories of the Trika were assimilated in the ritual 'syntax' of the *śrīcakra*.'[103] Her dissertation asserts 'the thematic unity between the concept and liturgy of the *śrīcakra*,' suggesting that, 'the worshiper, who is identical with the Absolute, Śiva, enacts at each performance of the worship the cyclic act of cosmic evolution and involution.'[104] While based in a different school and tradition, Khanna's study of the liturgy of *śrīcakra* reflects Davis' emission/reabsorption liturgy of Śaiva Siddhāṇta, and both added to the understanding of the ritual context of the *yantra*, and helped to focus the practical research on two *yantra* – the *śrīyantra*, and the simpler representation of the goddess/Devī/ *śakti* as the single downward-facing root triangle, the *mūlatrikoṇa*, which represents the first stage of evolution from the formless absolute.

Verse 22 of *Kāmakalā-vilāsa* says, 'The centre of *cakra* is …*bindu-tattva*. When it becomes ready to evolve it transforms and manifests as a triangle.'[105] This triangle is the *kāmakalā*, which represents the combined energies of Śiva (consciousness) and Śākti (power). *Vilāsa* is literally an appearance, a 'shining forth', an emission or evolution from the dot (*bindu)* which is found at the centre of all *yantra*: 'a metaphysical point of energy about to manifest'.[106] Describing the concept of *kāmakalā*, Padoux states quite simply, 'To say that *śrīcakra* is *kāmakalā* is to say that it is made up of the combined presence of Śiva (*kāma*) and Śakti (*kalā*).'[107] And according to Woodroffe: *'Kāmakalā-vilāsa* is the evolution of the One in its twin aspect as changeless consciousness (Śiva) and changing power (Śakti) into the multiple Universe. This evolution is represented by the *śrīyantra.*'[108] In the *śrīyantra* these qualities of *śivaśākti* manifest themselves as five downward-facing triangles (Śakti), and four upward-facing triangles (Śiva). The imagery of *bindu* and *kāmakalā* continued to influence the practical research beyond its expression within the *yantra*.

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101 Padoux, in Bühnemann (ed.), 2007, p. 248

102 Arthur Avalon (John Woodroffe), translation and commentary, *Kāmakalā-Vilāsa*, by Punyananda Nath, Ganesh and Co., Madras. 1921; https://archive.org/details/kama-kala-vilasa-by-punyananda-nath-arthur-avalon-ganesh-and-co.; https://www.holybooks.com/wp-content/uploads/Tantric-Texts-Series-10-Kamakalavilasa-of-Punyanandanatha-English-Translation-Arthur-Avalon-1953.pdf

103 Khanna, 1986, p. 19-20

104 Khanna, 1986, p. 19-20

105 Woodroffe, *Kāmakalāvilāsa*, 1922, p. 43

106 Woodroffe, *Kāmakalāvilāsa*, 1922, p. vii

107 Padoux in Bühnemann, 2007, p. 242

108 Woodroffe, *Kāmakalāvilāsa,* 19212 p. v

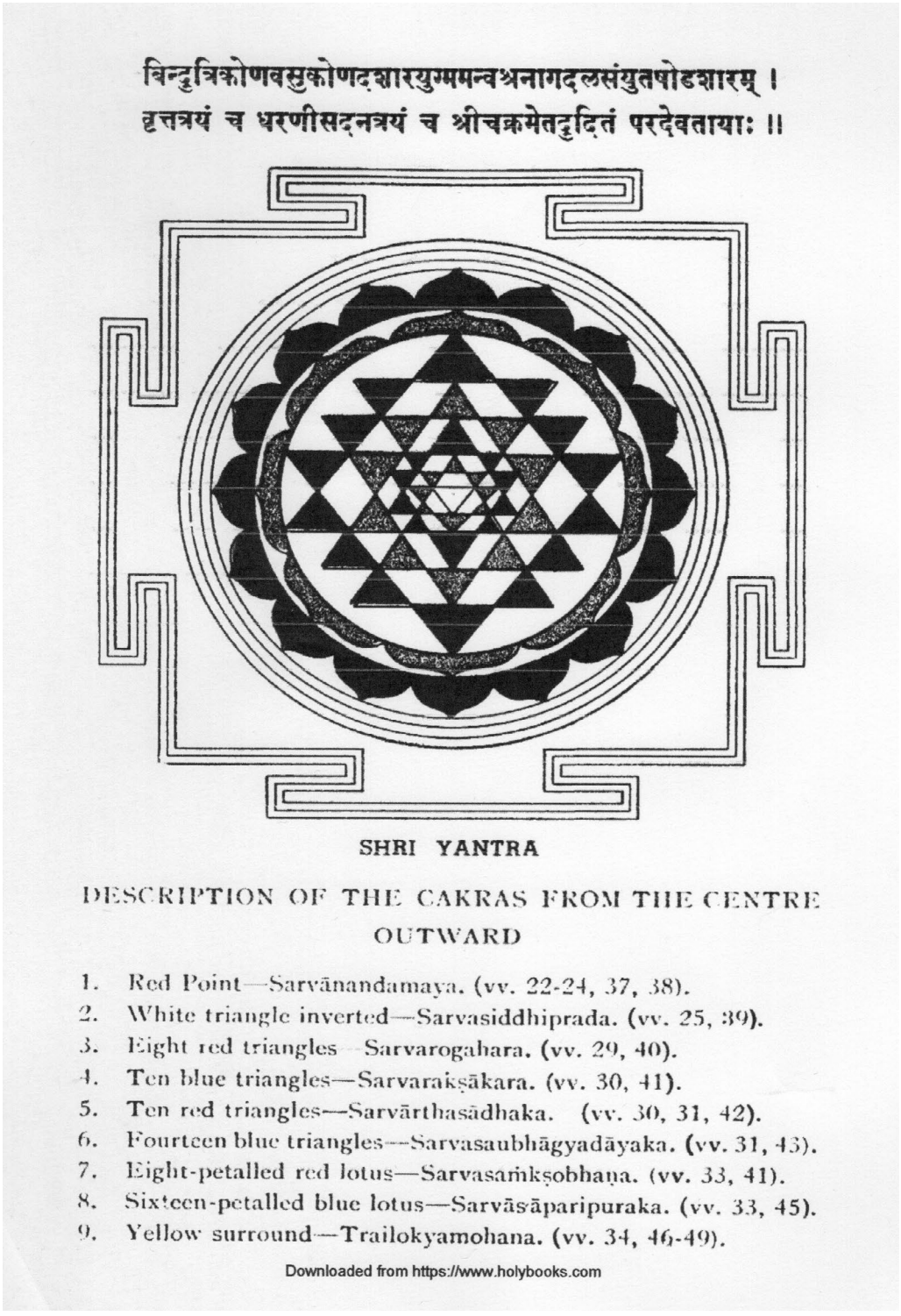


Fig. 30, Frontespiece of Woodroffe's 1922 publication, *The Kāmakalā-vilāsa,*
Published by Ganesh and Co, Madras, 1922.
The colours designated to the groups of triangles were reproduced in the 1953 edition,
and copied in the English version of Zimmer's *Artistic Form and Yoga* (see fig. 29)

This symbolic union of *kāmakalā/śivaśākti,* and the often sensual language used within the text, has led to its over-sexualisation by many western commentators. Philip Rawson, in his introduction to the Hayward Gallery 'Tantra' exhibition text, translates *Kāmakalā-vilāsa* as 'erotic joy in the movements of love',[109] and does not reconsider in his later publication *The Art of Tantra*.[110] (Both of which include a translation of the complete text, by an unacknowledged translator.) David Gordon White translates *Kāmakalā-vilāsa* as '*The Art of Love*', while suggesting a 'white-washed' version of *kāmakalā* within Śrī Vidyā.[111] Meanwhile, in an Introduction to its publication of the text of the *Saundarayalaharī*, the Theosophical Society in Adyar claims that this translation succeeds in 'washing out the torrent of filth accumulated in the *Kaula-marga* and restoring the purity of the Śrī Vidyā in relation to its external forms and ceremonies.'[112] Debrata SenSharma brings a sense of clarity to the subject and comments, 'Because of our ignorance of the true significance of symbolic mystic expressions in Tantric texts, the Tantric rites and practices have not only been misunderstood but also very much abused.'[113]

The rift between the gross and subtle, physical and metaphysical understandings of the concepts of *śivaśākti,* and *kāmakalā* illustrated above is not uncommon. As with many yogic, alchemical and mystical practices, terminology can be understood both literally and symbolically, and throughout the long history of these texts and practices, there is no doubt that all variations have been seen and experienced.[114] This confusion and disagreement amongst schools and sects leads me back to the simplicity and directness of the imagery. I relied on the texts I found useful and insightful. Woodroffe's translation and commentary on the *Kāmakalā-vilāsa* is still widely referenced, and Khanna's detailed interpretations proved to be a valuable resource. Richard Davis' study of ritual in the south Indian Śaiva lineages also provided insight into the concepts of emission and reabsorption, veiling and unveiling which were key to understanding the *śrīyantra.*

Grid yantra or square maṇḍala

I originally came across the images I am referring to as grid *yantra* and square *maṇḍala* in Khanna's book on *yantra*,[115] and later in the collections of Joost van den Bergh. Van den Bergh holds several grid-*yantra* in his collections, which he refers to as *Hari-Hara yantra* – a reference

109 Rawson, 1971, p. 5

110 Rawson, Philip, *The Art of Tantra*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1973, p. 10

111 David Gordon White, *Transformations in the Art of Love: Kāmakalā Practices in Hindu Tantric and Kaula Traditions*, History of Religions, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Nov., 1998), pp. 172-198, The University of Chicago Press. Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3176673 Accessed: 27/08/2010 05:54

112 S. Subrahmaṇya Śastri*, Saundaraya-laharī,* Theosophical publishing House, Adyar, 1948

113 Debrata SenSharma, *Aspects of Tantra Yoga*, Indica Books, Varanasi, 2007, p. 58

114 See, for example, White, 1998

115 Khanna, 2003 (1979), p. 137-140

Fig. 31, 'Checkerboard Hari-Hara *yantra*, with eight *liṅgas*'
from the collections of Joost van den Bergh

to their inclusion of both Śiva and Viṣṇu symbolism.[116] I also found two small booklets which illustrate several of these *yantra* on a temple stall in Assi Ghat, Varanasi (see fig. 6). Gudrun Bühnemann's *Maṇḍalas and Yantras in the Hindu Traditions* provides an in-depth study of these *yantra*.[117] While some examples exist on paper, they are more usually made on the ground for specific ritual and initiatory purposes, and destroyed once the ritual is complete; versions on paper generally acting as a guide for their construction. I saw several simple *yantra* of this kind on the temple ghats in Varanasi, made with coloured powders or small coloured beans, and resembling the *kolam* or *rangoli* patterns made each morning with rice flour as an auspicious entrance to the home.

The Śiva *liṅga* also appears in various of these 'grid *yantra*', which are referred to by Bühnemann as *liṅgatobhadra.*[118] Her study contains contributions from several authors including Hélène Brunner, Marion Rastelli and Andre Padoux, and gives both descriptions of their making and their use in ritual. Bühnemann's own contribution describes ritual practices from the Smārta traditions of Mahārāṣṭra, and describes various types of *bhadramaṇḍala* from both *Śaivite* and *Vaiṣṇava* traditions, where the images are referred to as *sarvatobhadra,* and generally contain a central lotus. Each author addresses specific ritual, initiatory and meditational practices employing *yantra* and *maṇḍala,* drawing comparisons with the construction of the *yantra* and that of the temple. Hélène Brunner discusses the use of the *yantra* as a kind of ritualized circumnavigation of the temple, describing an aspect of the *sarvatobhadra* as 'the part where the officiant moves around …as he would around a temple.'[119] Bühnemann describes the *liṅgatobhadras* as containing one or more *liṅga* and 'corridors or passages for

116 Joost van den Berg, *Magic Markings*, Joost van den Berg Ltd. and Ridinghouse, London, 2016, p. 12-13

117 Bühnemann, in Bühnemann (ed.), 2007

118 Bühnemann, in Bühnemann (ed.), 2007

119 Hélène Brunner, 'Mandala and Yantra in the Siddhānta', in Bühnemann (ed.), 2007, p.169

circumnavigation'.[120] While differing in structure and complexity, these *yantra* are all grid based and according to Madhu Khanna, have their origin in the Vedic fire altar.[121]

While it was fascinating to explore these grid-*yantra*, both through textual research and through their making, my interest returned to the simple single downward facing triangle, or *mūlatrikona*, and the *śrīyantra*. Engagement with the liturgy of *śrīyantra* through the writings of Khanna and the text of the *Kāmakalā-vilāsa* brought me to the study of the formless Absolute and its representation in the Śiva *liṅga.*

2. 4. 2 *Śiva liṅga*

The formless Absolute is represented by the Śiva *liṅga,* which can be seen in the form of a stone, or occasionally crystal (*shpatika*), occupying the central point within the Śiva temple complex. In painted form, it is the black ovoid. The *liṅga* is variously referred to within myth and legend as a pillar of light, a pillar of flame, a pillar of cloud, representing the unfathomable infinite. It can also be interpreted as the male phallus seeding the world, or as pure consciousness entering matter in order to stimulate response. The *Liṅgapurāṇa* describes the mythology of the emergence of the *liṅga* during a dispute between Viṣṇu and Brahma over their ascendancy. As each fails to discover the nature or source of this pillar of light over eons of time, Śiva reveals himself within the *liṅga* and both finally acknowledge Śiva as Lord of the Universe. The *Liṅgapurāṇa* states*:* 'Ever since then the worship of the Liṅga was well established in the world. The great goddess is the altar for the Liṅga. The Liṅga is the great lord himself.'[122]

The *Śiva Purāṇa* reads: 'The unmanifest is called the *liṅga*. It is the source of attributes as well as that wherein the universe merges and dissolves. It has neither beginning nor end. It is the material cause of the universe.'[123] Stella Kramrisch describes the *liṅga* in her publication *The Presence of Śiva*:

> It would rise through the millennia, as an abstract shape that implies the invisible presence of the Lord in the innermost sanctuary of a temple, the edifice surrounded on the outside by many images in which Śiva is seen as the main actor in his cosmic play.[124]

120 Bühnemann, in Bühnemann (ed.), 2007, p. 80

121 Khanna, 2003, (1979), p. 142

122 *Liṅgapurāṇa*, 1951, ch 19 v 15

123 J. L. Shastri, *Siva Purana*, chapter 3, section 7.2, verse 7; in answer to Śri Krṣṇa's query about the nature of the *liṅga.*

124 Stella Kramrisch, *The Presence of Śiva*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 158

Fig. 32, Śiva *liṅga* with Nandi in attendance, Kedar Ghat, Varanasi (photo by the author)

The term *liṅga* is also used to define the 'subtle body',[125] and more generally as a sign, or signifier. Within the multiplicity of possible meanings in the Hindu traditions, the Śiva *liṅga*, whether in stone, crystal or painted as a simple black ovoid, seems to transport us back to the stillness and silence of the mysterious origins of things. In Varanasi it forms the focus of temple worship, with its accompanying drumming – reminding of Śiva's constant drumming of the world into existence. Its signifier as the black ovoid became central to the research, and at a certain stage began to change into the golden seed-egg of the *hiraṇyagarbha.* What began as quite separate images in my mind began to merge into a continuity of evolution and involution, emission and reabsorption, as I followed the movement through center of the *yantra* into formlessness of the absolute, and back into manifestation.

2. 4. 3 *Hiraṇyagarbha*

In the *Īśvara Gītā, Lord Śiva's Song*, Śiva says, 'The sun god Hiraṇyagarbha, witness to the entire world, impeller of the wheel of time, was also born from me.'[126] The concept of *hiraṇyagarbha,* the golden seed/egg, is an ancient one, and is found throughout the Indian traditions, being cited in the *Vedas, Upaniṣads* and *Purāṇas,* as the first stirrings of life after the *prālāya*, or great sleep.[127] Here, the unformed begins to come to life, the cosmic waters bringing forth a seed-potential. The *Nasadiya Sukta* of the *Ṛg Veda* describes the theory of cosmogenesis: 'There was no existence, nor was there anything like non-existence, before the *hiraṇyagarbha*.' The text continues:

125 See, for example, Eliade, 2009, p. 42

126 Andrew J. Nicholson, *Lord Śiva's Song The Īśvara Gītā,* State University of New York Press, New York, 2014, p. 89

127 Goswamy, 2016, p. 126

> 'There was no air, no sky, no shelter, no cover, no day, no night, nothing at all. There was no water, no life or death, hence nothing such as mortal or immortal existed. There was only darkness – a vast, all-encompassing darkness. There was only a void, a huge, formless, blank, and nothing else.'[128]

The *Hiraṇyagarbha Sūktam*, sometimes called 'hymn to creation', describes Hiraṇyagarbha as a creator deity:

> Hiraṇyagarbha was present at the beginning; when born he was the sole lord of created beings; he upheld heaven and earth. …by whom the sky was made profound, and the earth solid, by whom heaven and the solar sphere were fixed, who was the measure of the water in the firmament.[129]

And in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*: 'Vast, divine, of inconceivable form, subtler than the subtle, that shines forth, further than the farthest, and yet here, near at hand. It is here within those who see, set in the secret place of the heart.'[130]

The 18th century Basohli painting 'Hiraṇyagarbha' is an illustration to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, and in his *The Spirit of Indian Painting*, historian of Indian art B. N. Goswamy describes the extraordinary depiction of the cosmic oceans, 'like giant rings of time on timeless waters. And in their midst, unmoving, completely still, floats the great golden egg, a perfect oval, seed of all that there is going to be.'[131] He cites texts of the *Matsya Purāṇa*:

> There was darkness everywhere and everything was in a state of sleep. Then *Svayambhu*, Self-Manifested Being, arose – a form beyond senses. It created the primordial waters first and placed the seed of creation into it. The seed turned into a golden womb, the *Hiraṇyagarbha*.[132]

2. 4. 4 *Śāligrāma and other small 'tantric abstractions'*

The small tantric abstractions described vaguely by Ajit Mookerjee as, 'Manuscript leaves illustrating the phases of evolution and dissolution of cosmic form'[133] and by Jamme as 'small

128 https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/rig-veda-english-translation/d/doc840009.html

129 Goswamy, 2016, p. 125

130 Vernon Katz and Thomas Egenes, *The Upanishads*, New York, Random House, 2015; *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣhad* III, 7, p. 98-99

131 Goswamy, 2016, p. 127

132 B. N. Goswamy, 2016, p. 126

133 Mookerjee, 1975, p. 109

Fig. 33, *Śāligrāma* stone,
after *Shaligram Puran*

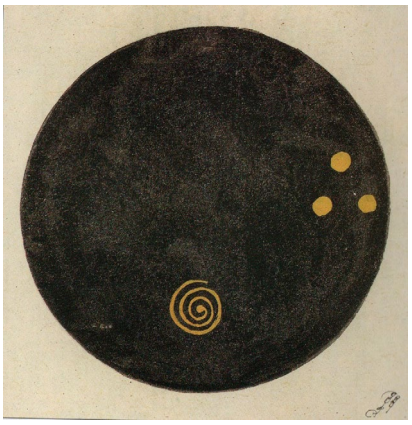


Fig. 34, Vyakul, *śāligrāma*,
after *Shaligram Puran*

manuscript paintings of an essentially scholarly nature',[134] are particularly hard to define, categorize and contextualize. Differentiating these paintings from what he describes as mostly Jain cosmological illustrations and tantric, sometimes erotic, folk art, Jamme gives them names such as, 'two *shaligrams'*, 'the notion of time', 'the endless dance of energy', 'a golden bronze *bindu'*.[135]

While the term *śāligrāma* has been used to define various small, usually circular, tantric abstractions, its origin lies in the small round stones found in river beds with markings made both by the action of the river water and that of water creatures. The markings designate the various attributes of Viṣṇu, such as lotus, conch, disc, club.[136] Some contain gold ore which has filled holes and indentations in the stone. These gold inlaid stones can also be known as *hiraṇyagarbha*, as their markings resemble the golden seed egg.[137] Acharya Vyakul's *Shaligram Puran* draws references from various texts such as *Brāhma Purāṇa, Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* and *Viṣṇu Rahasya* and illustrates the texts with both found objects (stones) and paintings, which are mostly his own.

In his Introduction to Vyakul's *Shaligram Puran,* Dr. Yogesh Mishra states, 'The word "Shaligram" was coined and assigned to these divine stones. "Shaligram" probably means a "*shila*" – stone, while "*gram*" means abode.' Mishra cites a story from the *Śiva Purāna* where Viṣṇu is turned to stone by means of a curse, and subsequently appears in the form of perfectly round stones on the bed of the river Gandaki in Nepal. 'These stones bear various signs and insignia of the various

134 Jamme, 2011, p. 98

135 Jamme, 2011, p. 84-89

136 Dr Yogesh Mishra, Introduction to Acharya Ram Charan Sharma 'Vyakul' Vidyavachaspati, *Shaligram Puran*, Museum of Indology, Jaipur, (undated), p. vi

137 Acharya Vyakul, p. ix

weapons, flowers and rosaries. Their colour, size, shape, transparency and these signs provide the classification of various types of Shaligrams representing the various incarnations of Lord Vishnu.'[138]

While the work with *yantra* was enhanced by textual reference and an understanding of its ritual significance, working with these later images, I allowed meaning to arise through the making process and explored my own interpretations of the imagery – inspired in part by Vyakul's own work. The paintings which illustrate the various *ślokas* in Vyakul's *Shaligram Puran* are his own. He says of his small paintings, 'For me pictures are the starting point of insight. Pictures are philosophical thoughts in colour and line, thoughts which we are unable to express in words.'[139]

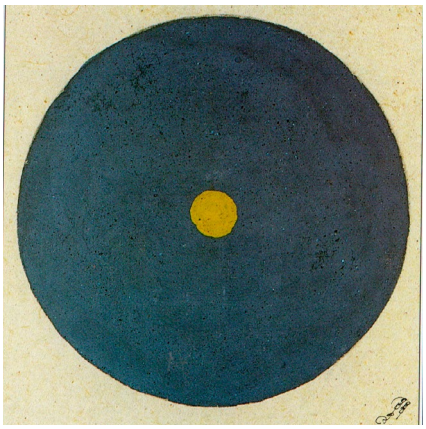


Fig. 35, Vyakul, *śāligrāma*,
after *Shaligram Puran*

138 Mishra, in Vyakul p. vii
139 E. M. Schoo, 1994

Chapter 3

Practical learning through the traditional arts: methods, materials, processes

Iconography, in that sense, does not mean so much that one thinks through icons, but mainly that one prays through icons.

Cornelia Tsakiridou

Fig. 36, Initial study in the Persian miniature tradition, based on imagery from the *Shahnameh*

All paintings in this section are by the author - apart from fig. 43.

Introduction

Before engaging directly with the non-figurative art of the Hindu traditions, I explored the methods, materials and processes of the traditional arts more generally. This was facilitated through practical classes at the School of Traditional Arts (STA). I attended courses on pigment making, preparation of surfaces and the techniques of Byzantine icon, Persian miniature, Indian miniature and Nepali Paubha painting. The teaching encompassed working on gessoed board, stretched linen, 300 or 600 gsm cold-pressed paper and Indian *vasli*, or layered jute paper, and provided the basis for the practical work carried out in the research. These classes were attended throughout the research process and provided ongoing stimulation and the opportunity to learn from teachers working within the traditions. My initial intention was to become familiar with the use of these materials, but as the study progressed, I found that each discipline had its own logic. The underlying geometrical composition and the methodical approach to each stage of image-making were as instructive as learning about paint making and the preparation of surface. The techniques were different in each case, and each provided a unique kind of learning. The materiality of the traditional objects studied and the processes of their making provided a grounding for the research, and led to questioning the role that materials and processes play in the effect of the image.

3. 1 *Methods and materials*

The exploration of materials began with the study of natural pigments, and a practical knowledge of their extraction from various rocks and earth sediments, and the leaves, seeds and flowers of plants (see figs. 36-42). These processes are documented in Appendix 1. Mineral colours have an inherent luminosity, and the extent to which each mineral is ground will affect the quality of the paint, the granular nature of certain mineral pigments giving a vibrant three-dimensionality to an essentially two-dimensional surface. Learning to mix natural pigments into an egg-tempera base within the context of Byzantine icon painting, provided my first connection with the materials themselves. I was immediately drawn to the use of carbon blacks and earth reds, and intrigued by the contrast between these very basic materials and the use of gold leaf which is literally breathed on to a surface of red bole clay. The white chalk of the gesso ground provides a luminous surface, which remains visible through semi-transparent layerings of egg tempera. Gritty limonite stones are mixed with the egg tempera-based paint, allowing the pigment to pool in interesting ways, and produce natural patternings on the chalk white surface. This is a process known as 'roshkrish' which is used to form the 'chaos level' of the icon painting.[1] The prolific use

1 Courses in icon painting at STA with Hanna Ward, undertaken from 2019-2022

Fig. 37, Cinnabar

Fig. 38, Grinding cinnabar with brass pestle and mortar

Fig. 39, Azurite, malachite and crysochola

Fig. 40, Crysochola

Fig. 41, Azurite, malachite and crysochola

Fig.42, Grinding malachite with gum arabic

of deep earth reds within the icon is contrasted with a bright cinnabar, traditionally reserved for the single line drawn around the halo, which has a layer of gold (see figs. 48 and 49).

This initial introduction to mineral pigments and other natural materials focused the research in a way that I had not expected. Materials and materiality took on a different meaning. Using these earth colours, gold and cinnabar, I felt that I was tapping into some ancient ritual use of colour, where it was not simply colour symbolism that was at work but the physicality of the substances themselves. Carbon blacks, earth reds, chalk and shell whites, as well as cinnabar and gold have been used in art objects and mark making for millennia and have often been part of sacred ritual processes. Earth reds and carbon blacks made the earliest rock-shelter hand prints and splatters, while cinnabar traces have been found on ancient Cycladic figurines and Chinese oracle bone inscriptions.[2]

Ananda Coomaraswamy observes that in Indian art there is never any attempt at illusion – paint remains paint, stone remains stone.[3] The materials themselves are given agency. Rather than look at the symbolism of colour, which changes according to culture, location and tradition, it

2 See, for example, *The Story of Cinnabar and Vermilion (HgS) at The Met*, Metropolitan Museum, New York, Feb, 2018 (https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/collection-insights/2018/cinnabar-vermilion).Ouyang Zhongshi, *Chinese Calligraphy*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2008, p. 68; John Winter, *East Asian Paintings: Materials, Structures and Deterioration*, Archetype Publications, London, 2008, p. 16

3 A. K. Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art*; Harvard University Press 1935, 'There is no feeling of texture or flesh, only of stone, metal, pigment, the object being an image in one or other of these materials, and not a deceptive replica of any objective cause of sensation.' p. 29

Fig. 43. Young woman being chased by mercury from Śiva's well;
mid 18th century Mughal style, British Museum

was more appropriate to this study to consider the quality of the material itself, its actuality – its chemistry obviously being reflected in its colour. Carbon is referred to as the chemical backbone of all life on earth, because it easily forms compounds with other elements, and is found in all animal and plant structures. Carbon pigment is usually made from burning various kinds of wood, or collected from the soot of oil lamps. Bone black pigments, including ivory black, are also carbons. Carbon black, mostly in the form of charcoal, is the most ancient and most commonly used black pigment.

Both carbon blacks and earth reds are ubiquitous, primal, the most easily available and the least expensive pigments. Conversely, cinnabar is formed by high pressure and intense heat, and is found only in volcanic rocks. The process of making the highest quality pigment is laborious, time-consuming and expensive. Recent research has concluded that all the gold found on earth is the result of meteor impact – it seems to exist outside space and time.[4] Both cinnabar and gold are used in many sacred art traditions to convey the heavenly. A bond of mercury and sulphur (HgS) and forged in the heat of the volcano, cinnabar is widely associated with alchemy. In classical Chinese, the character for cinnabar, (*dan* 丹), is synonymous with that for the alchemical process.[5] In India mercury represents the transformative power of Śiva; various 'wells of mercury' are described as Śiva's seed (see fig. 42). Orpiment (As2S3) is an arsenic sulfide

4 Leila Battison, Meteorites Delivered Gold to Earth, BBC News, 8th September 2011; National Geographic, May 1st, 2011; this was posited in 1968 by Robert S. Jones of the U.S. Geological Survey, and 'proven' by a team at Bristol University in 2011.

5 L. Wieger, *Chinese Characters: their origin, etymology, history, classification and signification*, p. 270; '丹 Cinnabar. The crucible or stove of the alchemists.'

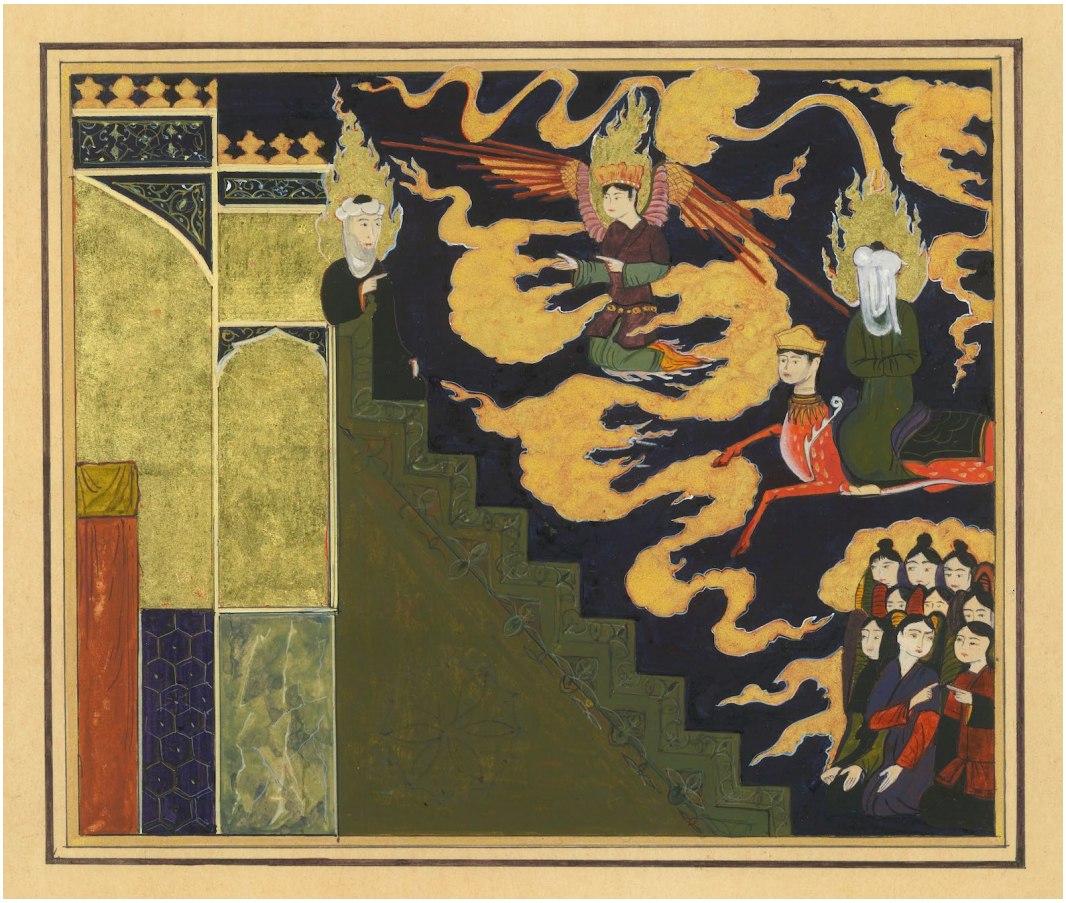


Fig. 44. Second study in the Persian miniature tradition, based on a page from Me'raj-Nameh (Book of the Mystical Ascent) Herat, 15th c. 'Mohammad meets Abraham'. Watercolour, gold leaf and shell gold.

yellow pigment, used in the Indian, Nepali and Tibetan painting traditions not simply for its bright golden yellow colour, but also as a preservative, as it has the ability to protect against insects. Orpiment is also found on early Celtic manuscripts, for example in *The Book of Kells*, where it may replace gold. Both cinnabar and orpiment are highly toxic, but through careful preparation they are transmuted into intensely coloured, long lasting and highly valued pigment. Carbon black, earth reds, cinnabar and gold, generally on a chalk white ground, are central to the practical work that constitutes the research; two materials that are basic to life on earth, and two associated with alchemical transformation and other-worldliness.

While the study of Byzantine icon painting led to my discovery of natural materials, and the subtle layering and patterning possible with egg tempera, Indian miniature painting uses the same pigment in a completely different way. Here it is mixed with gum arabic, sometimes with the addition of a chalk-like substance (*kharia*), to create a flat, opaque surface – a complete contrast to the layering and veiling possible with egg tempera. The techniques for the application of paint to surface are entirely different, and I employed both in my later works. Working briefly within the Persian miniature tradition added indigo to the palette, and engaging with Indian miniature painting I discovered red lead, (*sindur*, minium), orpiment, and, in contrast to its very limited

Figs. 45, Study of fire, based on imagery from the Book of the Mystical Ascent

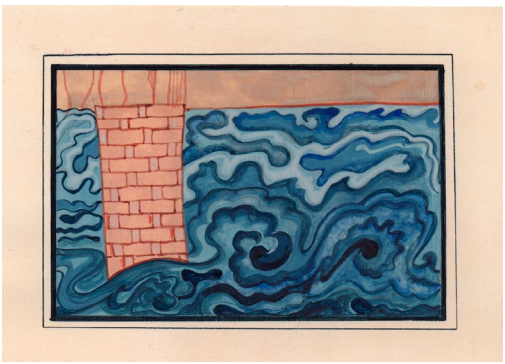
use in icon painting, a central and profuse use of cinnabar (as seen in fig. 56). Once I had an understanding of the basic colour palette of each tradition, I limited my colour use accordingly.

Within Persian miniature painting, I explored methods of applying gold to paper, and the representation of the basic elements, fire and water, within the tradition. Fig. 36 is a composition based on imagery from the *Shahnameh*, in which the fire dragon, the flames of a funeral pyre and a fire heated sky each required a different application of the gold. The gold of the fire itself was applied to several layers of gold size (gum ammoniac) in order to give a more three-dimensional, moving, flickering effect. The sky, in contrast, required a completely flat surface, and the gold leaf was applied to a thin layer of gum ammoniac painted over a vermilion base layer. In a further experiment in the use of gold leaf, scraps and discards of the leaf were scattered to create the border. Elements of the composition were allowed to break through the frame, a common technique in the *Shahnameh*. The second painting in this tradition is a copy of a well-known image from the *Book of the Mystical Ascent*. Here shell gold was painted over a layer of vermilion, creating an ephemeral, more textural surface.[6] It provides a lively, mobile surface, which is in contrast to the gold leaf of the architecture, and to the flames which rise intriguingly from the heads of the prophets (fig. 43).

I was fascinated with the complexity, intricacy and vibrant colour of the Persian miniature, but I was wary. The very nature of the imagery seemed capable of casting spells, ensnaring in a world of supernatural beings. The busy-ness of the imagery both intrigued and disturbed. But I wanted to explore the intense combination of indigo, vermilion and gold and the stylized patterning of

6 Shell gold is made by breaking down sheets of gold leaf in gum arabic and water. It is a long process of hand grinding, soaking and washing. In the Indian miniature painting tradition it is often made in shells, which are a useful shape, and provide an appropriately abrasive surface.

Figs. 46, Study of the patterning of water, based on Persian miniature paintings



Figs. 47 and 48, Studies of the patterning of water, based on Persian miniature paintings

the elemental substances. Fig. 44 continued the study of fire, and figs. 45, 46 and 47 studied the traditional patternings of water. These early studies were concerned with materials and elements of design, but I had to resist the temptation to simplify, strip back to essentials, of materials, structure and content. Towards the end of the research, various elements of both icon painting and Persian miniature found their way into the more abstract studies.

3. 2 *Ritual, process and cosmic laws*

The preparation and use of natural pigment demands specific processes, and the methods of preparation, which are so integral to the ritual of traditional painting, and are often dictated by the materials themselves. The repetitive and time-consuming processes of pigment making can be seen as an alchemical process of transmutation, purifying the toxic substances and drawing out the pure essential colour (figs. 37-42 and appendix I). These slow processes may be considered as a preparation of the painter as well as of the materials. Grinding the pigment,

Fig. 49, Icon painting: Archangel Michael
Gold leaf on gesso board with egg tempera

sanding and burnishing surfaces, brought to mind the repetitive actions of sweeping and cleaning carried out before meditation practice in Japanese temple traditions, or the initial breath work considered essential before many meditation practices.[7] It can seem laborious, time consuming, but necessary for preparing the ground. Regulating the breath instills a kind of calm rhythm, which can also be achieved with the grinding of pigment, burnishing of paper, sanding of gesso or bole; grinding through resistance, boredom, focusing attention.

Working within both the Byzantine Icon and Nepali Paubha traditions, the painting process itself provided the most unexpected area of learning. This was very clear in the painting of an icon, where the initial drawing of the image, with its attention to inherent geometries and proportions, and the process of applying pigmented egg tempera to gesso board followed a very strict pattern. Within the context of the Russian Prosopon School, the icon painting process

7 In Daoism, for example, the repetitive action of the breath is often referred to as 'ploughing the field'. The *dan tian* (丹 田) (literally cinnabar field) of the lower abdomen the site for this 'ploughing' by the breath. The image known as the 'Inner Landscape of the Body', housed in the White Cloud Temple in Beijing, has an image of a boy ploughing a field in the abdominal area.

Fig. 50, Icon painting: showing 'roshkrisch' technique;
red earth and brown ochre pigment in egg tempera; gold leaf on red clay bole base;
with cinnabar line around halo.

begins with the application of a dark base, each subsequent layer being painted with a lighter colour, symbolically showing a "progressive enlightenment", the journey from dark to light.[8] From the dark 'chaos' level,[9] through to the final addition of bright white points of light, the nature of egg tempera allows each stage to remain in a transparency of successive layering which represents this movement from darkness to light. In her doctoral thesis, Irina Bradley explains, 'In the beginning, the painter is instructed to remember the chaos of creation when using a brush stroke technique which results in the marble-like effect of the base layer where gesso is visible through the layer of paint.'[10] I later used these techniques and the stripped-down elements of the icon when working with ideas of chaos and emergence.

8 Irina Bradley, 'Spiritual Striving in Icon Painting', PhD thesis, PFSTA (University of Wales), 2019, p. 153

9 The 'roshkrish' technique mentioned earlier.

10 Bradley, 2019, p. 179

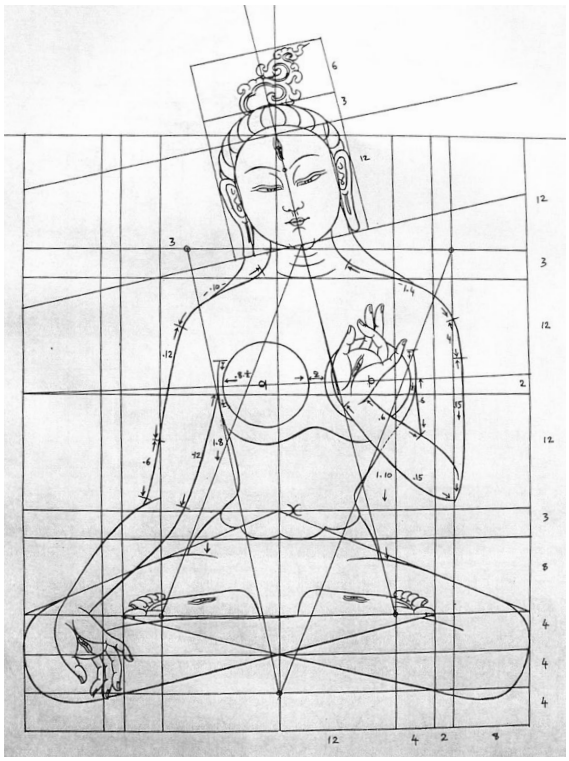


Fig. 51, Underlying geometry of White Tara image

A different kind of learning through process occurred when working within the Nepali Paubha tradition. The image of the Buddhist deity, White Tara was created through a very precise geometry, where the intersection of the N/S : E/W lines of orientation (horizontal and vertical axes) locates the heart of the deity, and all subsequent geometries stem from this point. According to Dr. Renuka Gurung, the ground for the image would then be divided into a 9 by 9 grid, made with a thread soaked in orpiment or yellow ochre pigment. This process is known in Sanskrit as *sūtrapātan-vidhi*, (*sūtra* - thread; *apātan* - to compose, allocate; *vidhi* - process). The name, or Sanskrit seed syllable of the deity is written in a triangle within the central space, and in a spiral movement from the center to periphery, each of the 80 remaining units (*koṣthas*) are numbered, and may be inscribed with seed syllables representing the names of the entourage or attributes associated with the deity.[11] Cinnabar powder is sprinkled on each of the enclosures as an offering, and once this ritual is completed, the canvas is washed and veiled with a thin layer of paint – traditionally orpiment, which also acts as a preservative for the completed image.[12]

In her introduction to the *Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad,* Alice Boner states, 'No image destined for worship should ever be made without first tracing the geometrical plan of its essential configuration (*pañjara*).'[13] In working with the White Tara image, the intersection of the N/S-E/W (horizontal and vertical) threads forms the basis for this underlying geometrical structure which acts as an invisible support to the figurative image. This underlying structure may be referred to as its *yantra*, and working within the Paubha tradition illustrated this underlying connection between the geometry of the *yantra* and the proportion and placement of the figurative image. Boner explains, 'The essential concern of this text [the *Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad*] is to demonstrate that the use and language of form …is considered an autonomous, direct reflection of cosmic laws and

11 Renuka Gurung, '*Understanding, Preserving, and Transmitting the Tradition of Paubha Painting in Twenty-First Century Nepal*', PhD thesis, University of Wales, 2012, p. 115. (I attended classes with Dr. Gurung throughout the research process.)

12 Gurung, 2012, p. 117

13 Alice Boner, *Vastusūtra Upaniṣad: The Essence of form in Sacred Art,* (3rd edition), Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 2000, p. 3

Fig. 52, White Tara: in the Nepali Paubha tradition

expression of religious and metaphysical conceptions.[14] The painting of White Tara was made according to these underlying geometries, and the colours used were based on images of White Tara in the cave paintings of Ajanta (fig. 51).

14 Boner, 2000, p. 5

Fig. 53, Ganeśa: in the Nepali Paubha tradition

3. 3 *Copying sacred imagery*

Titus Burckhardt insists that within traditional sacred art, the artist does not aim to interpret or give a personal impression of the subject, but rather to faithfully copy what might be considered to be a blue-print …'while with concentration, understanding and skill aiming to bring life and energy to the work', acting as a kind of 'pure channel' for ideas or forms which Burckhardt suggests reside on a higher plane. He explains,

> Far from postulating a sudden flash of intuition, the creation of an "icon" …is essentially founded on the faithful transmission of a prototype… the intuition of the artist may bring

> out certain qualities implicit in his model, but adherence to tradition and faith suffice to perpetuate the sacramental quality of his art.[15]

Although I had originally considered these statements of Burckhardt to be somewhat outdated and rigid, by engaging through practice I came to appreciate that within the context of traditional sacred art, my learning came through strict adherence to traditional practices and processes. This learning was enhanced when facilitated by a teacher initiated within the tradition, and for whom the process of painting is a spiritual practice. I discovered that it was not possible for me to approach sacred imagery without the appropriate teacher.

Remaining in the Paubha tradition, I painted an image of Ganeśa (fig. 52). The image reminded me of the many shrines to Ganeśa I had seen in a recent field trip to Varanasi, where statues of the deity are regularly given a new coat of bright orange (red lead – *sindur*) paint. It seemed appropriate here to use the *sindur* pigment bought in the Varanasi spice market, a colour more commonly seen in Indian miniature depictions of Ganeśa than in Nepali painting. The painting was made during an on-line class with Renuka Gurung, and when answering a question concerning the difficulty in obtaining the correct details of the drapery and foldings of fabrics, Dr Gurung suggested that we begin with the basic shape of the deity, and as each element of the design is added, to act as if making an offering – of scarves, jewelry, cakes… Following this advice, I came to understand a different kind of devotional relationship to image.

In her teaching of orthodox icon painting, Emilie van Taack suggests that the student should have a rapport with the image before engaging with the work.[16] This was apparent to me when I began working within the context of Indian miniature painting. I was more personally involved in the process of copying and also noted the difference between painting a more mundane subject and painting the image of a deity. The former allowed a certain amount of personal observation and interpretation, the latter demanded strict adherence to tradition. The manual of painting, the *Citasūtra* of the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* (6th–8th centuries CE), gives very precise instructions for the painting of images, but a distinction is made between the painting of nature and everyday objects where instructions are less precise, and the painting of a deity, where they are very exact.[17] The deity is seen as part of the unchanging archetypal realm, the garden or landscape a part of the changing world of manifestation. The exact proportion, the position of the limbs, the colour and precision of the artifacts held in the hands, each detail of

15 Titus Burckhardt, *Sacred Art East and West,* Perennial Books, 1967, p. 13

16 Emily van Taack, Perspective and Grace: Painting and the Likeness of Christ, *Road to Emmaus,* Vol 7 no 11, 2006, p. 58

17 Stella Kramrisch (trans.), *Vishnudharmottaram: a treatise on Indian painting,* Calcutta University Press, Calcutta, 1928

Fig. 54, Krṣṇa: copy of a section of 'Krṣṇa presenting a lotus to Radha', Rasamanjari, Basohli; V&A, London. Natural pigments in gum arabic on *vasli* paper

dress and demeanor, represent the attributes associated with the deity, they are a very precise indication of the qualities of the deity and cannot be changed.

Copying the image of Devī (fig. 55) proved to be a particularly powerful experience. It is stark, and clearly intended as a devotional and instructional tool. The Krṣṇa image, while adhering to the prescribed portrayal of Krṣṇa, is a detail of a larger more complex image which illustrates a narrative (fig. 54). It lacks the intense simplicity of the iconic Devī image. Through painting these two images it was possible to understand their individual characteristics more clearly. Both could be considered as images for devotion, but they seemed to express the difference in the kind of

Fig. 55, Devī, (Mankot, 1720-30)
Cinnabar, sindur, piori yellow, zinc white, indigo and shell gold on *vasli* paper

devotional practice attributed to Krṣṇa, here representing the playful aspects of the divine, and the more upright attention and concentration required by the goddess. In this image, Devī (the non-specific, all-encompassing aspect of the goddess, or Śakti) is holding implements usually attributed to Śiva – the drum and trident – and also a sword and bowl, as opposed to the more familiar bow, arrows, goad and noose. In her most ferocious form, she might have eight arms and manifest the attributes of all the gods, which she has incorporated into herself.

I approached this painting with trepidation. I had discovered the original while working in the library of the Alice Boner center in Varanasi, and felt impelled to paint her, as if the image had

chosen me. From the first day, my concentration was intense. I have never been comfortable drawing figures, and my early experience of life drawing was in the school of Auerbach and Bomberg and employed a heavy use of charcoal and eraser. In certain classes at the STA tracing the image was encouraged, but that was not the case here. It was painted in a class with Susana Marin, who insists on the discipline of hand drawing. The careful and time-consuming attention to proportion in the free-hand drawing process induced a depth of familiarity by fully engaging skills of observation and hand-eye coordination; an intensity that tracing can never give. Despite the usual classroom distractions and several catastrophic accidents with paint spillage, the goddess continued to take shape before my eyes in a way that seemed to come from elsewhere; her calm features belying her four-armed ferocity. Mid-way through the week I began to have a series of dreams which were directly related to the image and specifically to Devī's sword. By the last day, which was mostly taken up with her adornment with an enumerable number of pearls, she had obtained a powerful presence. I had developed an intimacy with her. Although the image of Krṣṇa does not hold the same qualities for me as Devī, both contain a presence which I do not find in the other figurative studies I have made. I was reminded again of Emily van Taack's insistence that her students choose to work with an image that has drawn them, this initial attraction being important for their engagement and possible transformation through the work.[18] While a closeness will come from concentration on with any image, this is amplified when there is an initial connection. The limited use of the colour (cinnabar, indigo, orpiment, white and touches of gold), and directness of the image of Devī seemed to provide a strength and authenticity, a stripped-down simplicity that I found compelling.

The experience of painting Devī strengthened my understanding that copying sacred imagery demands total compliance with the original work. This was no longer an external demand given by theorists, or even teachers, but one which came from engaging with the image itself. Through painting Devī, I understood that this was an instructional device, the slightest degree of personal preference and 'imagination' would render the image powerless, and the exercise useless. In relation to this, Sthaneshwar Timalsina suggests that within *tantra*, the image reminds the practitioner of the entire tantric system or the particular liturgy associated with a deity. He explains, 'To "see" the goddess with the mind's eye thus recalls the entire philosophical scaffolding.'[19] Through engaging with this practice, I experienced the copying of sacred imagery as a way to absorb this liturgy.

I had been searching for an appropriate *prātima* of Śiva, and finally discovered the image copied in fig. 56, which has a simple palette of cinnabar, black, white and gold. This painting was made in the later stages of the research project, and brought me back to my initial research into materials,

18 van Taack, 2006, p. 58

19 Sthaneshwar Timalsina, *Tantric Visual Culture: A Cognitive Approach*, New York, Routledge, 2017, p.19

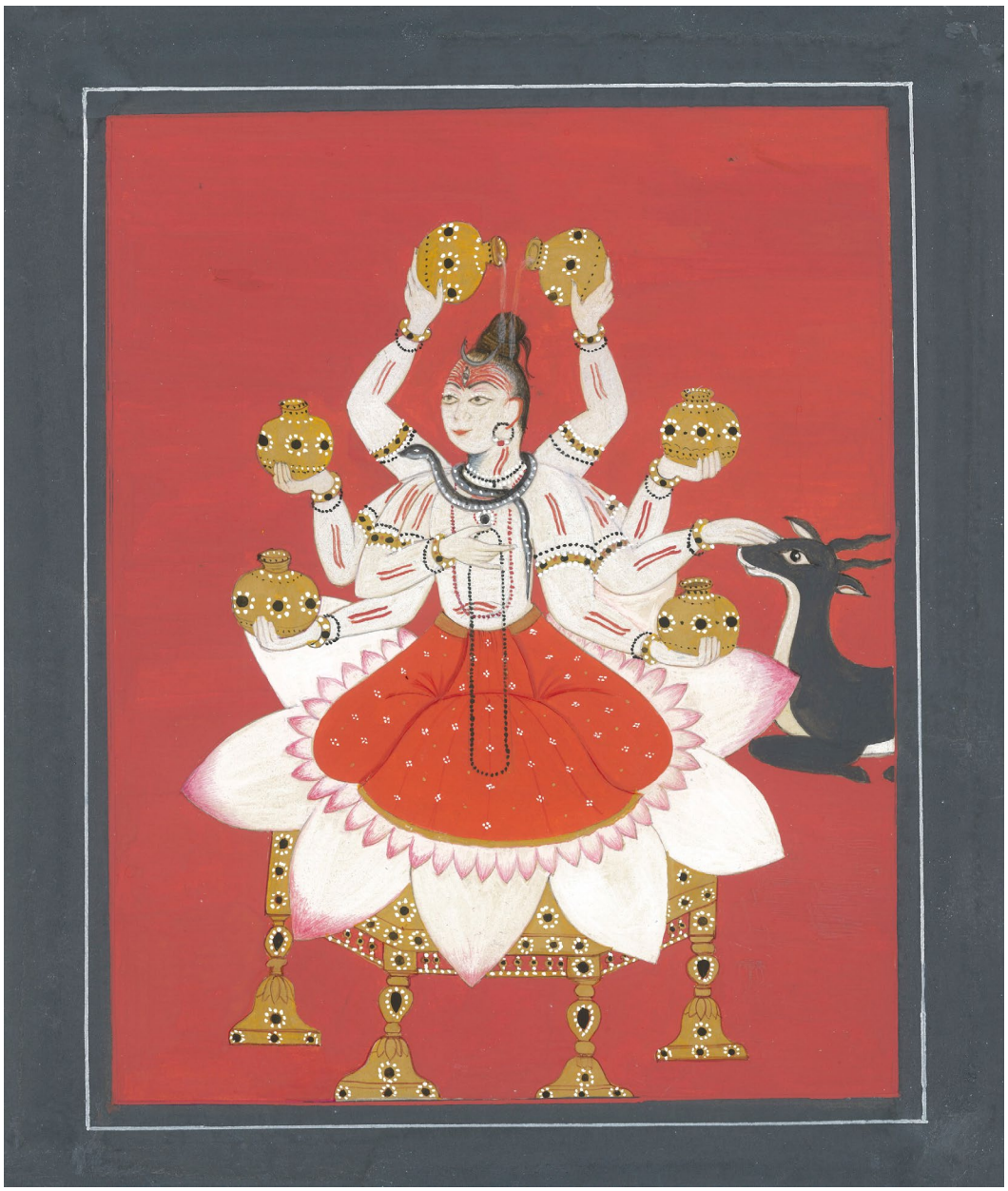


Fig. 56, Śiva: Cinnabar, carbon black, zinc white, gold on *vasli* paper

the alchemical nature of cinnabar, and its identification with Śiva. When I work with cinnabar, I think about its forging within the volcano, the forcing together of mercury and sulphur, the *yin* and *yang* of Chinese alchemy at the same time symbolic and real. The making of cinnabar pigment is an exemplary example of ritual process which required patience, concentration, repetition, its use demanding care due to its residual toxicity. When I made this image, I was already engaged with the non-figurative image of Śiva as *liṅga* – the simple black ovoid. This contrast between the two images provided a constant reminder of the extraordinary inter-dimensionality of meaning possible within Indian imagery, and very specifically within the nature of Śiva. It was a reminder, too, of Stella Kramrisch's insistence that, when considering Śiva, we must hold all levels

of interpretation together, not either/or – but also/and… 'In its precosmic, preconscious totality, everything is contained, including consciousness and nothingness.'[20]

3. 4 *Reflections*

The learning acquired through the copying process was unexpected, and seemed to be embedded within the image itself. The images of Krṣṇa, Devī and Śiva were painted one each year over a period of three years, and the possibility of understanding an underlying doctrine through the making process became clearer as the research progressed. By working with awareness, an unexpected familiarity began to grow. Not simply a familiarity with the image – but of what lay behind the image: a kind of identification, which came about through concentrated effort and an absorption in the subject. I came to understand that these images are instructional, educational and provide a visual access to underlying philosophies and teaching; they may be said to contain a 'visual theology'. The concentrated copying of an image provides a training of the senses, a honing of perception.

Emilie van Taack says of her students, 'it is not simply a copying process, it is a spiritual work which transforms them.' She continues:

> We cannot copy mechanically, we have to come into relation with the image… to go into the icon, to understand how it is drawn, how it is made …you take on the state that is depicted in the icon. This is spiritual work.[21]

When asked whether her students prayed while painting, van Taack answered that it is not so much that they pray while painting, but that the icon is their prayer.

Through the earlier studies within Christian, Buddhist and Islamic (Persian) traditions I learnt much about methods and materials, but also about processes and their relationship to the specific teachings embodied within both imagery and methodology. Working within the figurative traditions of the traditional arts, I discovered the effect of absorbing an image in this way. The intensity of looking, the demand for hand-eye co-ordination, has an effect on both mind and body. The act of copying, which I had originally dismissed as irrelevant to my own artistic processes, became a profound learning tool. I observed that in order to bring a particular expression to the figure, I had to absorb the expression and gesture. To paint Krṣṇa it is necessary to become Krṣṇa. The degree of success of the paintings seemed to relate directly to the degree I was able to make that identification. I returned to the words of Mircea Eliade,

20 Kramrisch, 1981, p. 20

21 van Taack, 2006, p. 58

which seem to explain the effect of working in this way: 'The importance here is that it is no longer an intellectual operation; it is not the communication of an "idea", it is *experiencing* "truth"'.[22]

This process also drew my attention to the fact that as much as I might try to create an image according to traditional guidelines, there is no doubt that in every case, the painting I produced could easily be identified as my own. Looking at the image of White Tara, the line is definitely mine. The choice of colour, though influenced by images from Ajanta, and restricted to a traditional colour palate, no doubt reflected my own choice of shade and tone. The final image was undoubtedly mine. Even in the images of Devī and Śiva, which are closest to the original, I can identify my hand, my slightly clumsy use of the brush. An element of the personal seems to be inevitable, but maybe it gives the image a kind of humanity, whereas the perfect copy can somehow lack vitality. Maybe it is the tension between the personal and the universal – always aiming for that which is beyond the individual, while understanding that perfection is not attainable, and a more mechanical perfection not even desirable.

This initial part of the research provided the essential ground work to move on to the study of *yantra*. The feeling of being 'out of my comfort zone' with figurative representation no doubt added to the learning, but it was with relief that I moved back to the more familiar realm of the non-figurative. This tension I had identified between the universal and the personal, perfections and imperfections, continued as a question in my mind throughout the research process.

22 Eliade, 2009, p. 208

Chapter 4

Yantra – horizontals, verticals, geometries and grids

Behind every stable special 'form' in nature there must be a principle of control. …The visual representation or optical diagram of the actual disposition of stress (power) is its yantra.

Pramathanatha Mukhyopadhyaya

Fig. 57, *Sarvatobhadra yantra*
Cinnabar, orpiment, malachite, conch white and carbon black, in gum arabic on *vasli* paper

All paintings in this chapter are by the author.

4. 1. *Introduction to yantra*

I have always felt more at home dealing with colour, line, inter-relationship of form, so the transition from working with the figurative image (*pratimā*) of the goddess to working with her *yantra* brought a sense of relief and familiarity. I find non-figurative imagery more interesting as it seems to demand a response from a deeper more intuitive level of understanding, a shift from the mental and emotional to a more subtle, refined and essential expression. As with the figurative image of Devī, information is embedded within the *yantra*, but here the process of making reflected this in a more direct way. These are artifacts that are used in ritual and the actual making of the *yantra* allows the practitioner to enter into this ritual process.[1]

Etymologically, a *yantra* is a tool, a device, and it was interesting to observe that the early 18th century Astronomical Observatory, the Jantar Mantar in Jaipur, describes its various instruments as *yantra*.[2] Heinrich Zimmer describes the *yantra* as 'an instrument or tool, a device or mechanism a person uses for carrying out a specific task'.[3] He reflects on the importance of making the *yantra* to an exact pattern. 'They are like road maps in their origin and purpose. In them there can be no free play of an active imagination.'[4] He suggests that the painter uses measurements and symbols in the same way as a cartographer 'their vital symbolic function forbids any artistic licence with their form.'[5] André Padoux similarly stresses, 'The patterns of *yantras* and *maṇḍalas* are strictly rule governed, one cannot fashion them imaginatively. They must be drawn as prescribed by tradition.'[6] Pramathanatha Mukhyopadhyaya explains:

> Behind every stable special "form" in nature there must be a principle of control; a principle of control which evolves and maintains a special *rūpa* (form/sight) and *nama* (name/sound) in the Spiritual Ether which is itself without *rūpa* and *nama*. …The visual representation or optical diagram of the actual disposition of stress (power) is its *yantra*.[7]

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1 It is important to stress the inseparable nature of *yantra* and *mantra* within tantric ritual and practice. Sound and form are inextricably linked, the vibration of sound manifesting as a specific form. In tantric ritual, *yantra* and *mantra* are interdependent, but while remaining aware of its importance, mantric ritual practice requires initiation, and the study of *mantra* is beyond the scope of the current research. For a detailed study of *mantra* and sound see, for example, Andre Padoux, *Vāc: The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras*, SUNY Press, New York, 1990.

2 I visited the Jantar Mantar during my 2023 field trip. See also, A. K. Khanna, *Jantar Mantar, The Astrological Observatory of Jaipur*, Satya Book House, Jaipur, 2023

3 Heinrich Zimmer, *Artistic Form and Yoga in the Sacred Images of India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1984, p. 28

4 Zimmer, 1984, p. 107

5 Zimmer, 1984, p. 108

6 Andre Padoux, *The Hindu Tantric World: An Overview*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017, p. 144

7 Professor Pramathanatha Mukhyopadhyaya, Appendix to John Woodroffe, *The World as Power, Power as Life*, Ganesh and Co., Madras, 1922, p. 81

The *yantra* pre-figures the figurative, acting as an informational coding: it carries the same message as the figurative imagery but can be received on a more subtle level. It is closer to the formless – a pattern that "in-forms". Working with *yantra* therefore implies a direct engagement with the 'principle of control' mentioned by Mukhyopadhyaya, which serves as a reminder that while *yantra* are commonly used in daily propitiatory prayer, they also have a long association with magic and spell-making.[8] Within this context, Ramachandra Rao describes magic as an attempt to understand and interact with the abstract world, which is a 'network of energies, forces and vectors,' suggesting that the *yantra* is an expression of this world of vibration, a map of the abstract world.[9]

While I have been fascinated by *yantra* for many years, it was not until I had the opportunity to work with teachers initiated within a tradition that I felt able to approach this subject. This also affected the decision to limit my study to two types of *yantra*: the single, downward-facing triangle associated with the primal force of Śakti, or Devī, and the expansion of this root triangle into its expression as *śrīyantra,* or great *yantra*, which is a visual metaphor of the constant emergence of form and its re-assimilation into formlessness, the activity of the great goddess, Devī or Sundarī.[10]

4. 2 *Construction of the yantra – alignment and spatial awareness*

The initial step in the geometrical construction of the *yantra* is to create the primary horizontal and vertical axes. This immediately fixes the *yantra* in space, aligned to the four directions. The crossing point of the horizontal and vertical axes (the *brahmasūtra* and *somasūtra*, the heavenly and earthly threads) denotes the *bindu*, from which the *yantra* manifests itself. By placing the compass point at this crossing, the initial circle is drawn, and from here, multiple geometries can be made. The construction progresses from this center towards the periphery. The *yantra* is bounded by a square which provides stability, encloses and protects the space within the *yantra*, but also gives access via its four gates (*bhūpura*), which face the four directions. The *yantra* is a "seat" (*pītha*) for the deity. The crossing of the heavenly and earthly axes evokes the concept of *tīrtha* (literally crossing), a term which in the physical world denotes a place of pilgrimage, a

8 In his practical guidebook *Yantra Images*, Dilip Kumar begins with a warning: 'The Mantras and Yantras in this book should be practiced and used for the help, good cause and service of mankind'. He adds that the author and publishers are not responsible for any harm or loss that may be caused. Dilip Kumar, *Yantra Images,* Varanasi, Indian Mind, 2010, p. 3

9 Ramachandra Rao, *The Yantras*, Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, 1988, p. 3

10 Within Tantra, the energy of manifestation and transformation is referred to as Śakti, and is seen as a female force in relation to the male force of Śiva, or pure consciousness. Śakti is represented in various female forms as Devī, Kalī, and in Śri Vidya as Tripurasundarī.

Fig. 58, *Śrī Trisuddhiya yantra*
Cinnabar, orpiment, conch white and carbon black, in hide glue on fine linen canvas

place where the mundane and the sacred intersect, a point of contact between the seen and the unseen, form and formlessness.[11]

In all types of *yantra* and *maṇḍala*, it is the establishment of the diagram in space, the horizontals and verticals defining an east/west – north/south orientation, that enables its use in ritual. While engaged in its making, this alignment establishes a spatial connection between the maker and the work. Once the construction drawing is complete, painting begins from the periphery and returns to the centre. The image is brought to completion at the *bindu*, which is usually painted

11 Diana Eck, Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India, Columbia University Press, New York, 1996, p. 5; Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 15; Ravi M. Gupta and Kenneth R. Valpey, *The Bhagavata Purana*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2017, p. 234

Fig. 59, *Śrī Katyayani yantra*
Cinnabar, orpiment, conch white and carbon black, in hide glue on fine linen canvas

gold.[12] Constructing the *yantra* in this way traces the evolution of form through various complex geometries, and its painting the dissolution back towards the formless. This mirrors the processes of emission and reabsorption, which are explained by Richard Davis:

> The path of emission (*sṛṣṭi*) denotes a movement from unity to differentiation, from one to many, from pervasiveness to increasing particularity. By contrast, the path of reabsorption

12 Workshop instruction by Dr Renuka Gurung. For more on the construction of *yantra*, see Khanna 2003, p. 32-34; Satyananda Saraswati, *Tattwa Shuddhi: The Tantric Practice of Inner Purification,* Bihar School of Yoga, Munger, 1984, p. 72; Zimmer, 1984, p. 78; Ramachandra Rao, *The Yantras*, Delhi, Sri Satguru Publications, 1988, p. 12-14; Ramachandra Rao, *Sri Chakra; Its Yantra, Mantra and Tantra*, Delhi, Sri Satguru Publications, 2011 [1982], p. 10.

> (*samhāra*) reintegrates that which has become separated; it reinstates the unity lost through differentiation.[13]

Progressing through the stages of the construction process, the orientation took on greater importance as I attempted to maintain the east/west alignment of the heavenly thread. I could understand the process as stages within a ritual; painting the *yantra* was like entering a different space, as if it were possible to step through the gates, navigate the circles, and eventually arrive at the point of complete concentration. These ideas were echoed in Timalsina's description of the *yantra* as a model of the temple and its use in visualization:

> Viewing the *maṇḍala* [*yantra*] thus becomes a complex ritual of walking through the mental space where different names and forms are located in particular gates and shrines inside the big complex. The practitioner walks through the constructed mental space and encounters different deities seated in their particular shrines greeting them with their *mantras*.[14]

As I worked with the two *yantra* paintings illustrated here, (figs. 58 and 59) I was aware of their practical use, their functionality. Painting the *yantra* re-enforced the idea of the sacred image as a tool for teaching, its making as a ritual process. The experience echoed the words of Heinrich Zimmer: 'Sacred images, which are remarkable copies and appropriate vessels for inner visions, have to be qualitatively different from other *objets d'art* in their fundamental form.'[15] These are tools to be used, instructional diagrams. The effect of the *yantra* is somehow embedded within its actuality and its materiality. This was reflected in the painting process, the use of a fine Nepali canvas and a colour palate limited to four mineral colours: cinnabar (red), orpiment (yellow), conch shell white, and carbon black.

Within the Nepali *Sādanamālā* imagery, which was the reference for figures 58 and 59, there is an emanation of seed energy from the primary triangle, a radiation of fine lines and seed dots which culminate in the lotus petals which are the fulfillment of the potential of the seed. The concentric circles of the active manifestation of form are contained by the square of the earth, with its guardian gates. These two images represent different aspects of the goddess (the black, Kālī (*Śrī Katyayani yantra*), the red, Devī (*Śrī Trisuddhiya yantra*)) and the two paintings elicited a very different response. I became fascinated with the inner lines of both triangles, the Kālī *yantra* already expanded and differentiated into the primal elements, the white, black,

13 Richard Davis, *The Oscillating Universe: Worshiping Siva in Medieval India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1991, p. 72

14 Timalsina, 2017, p. 22; Bühnemann, in Bühnemann (ed.), (2007), discusses in detail how the terms *yantra*, *cakra* and *maṇḍala* may be used interchangeably.

15 Zimmer, 1984, p. 53

yellow, red possibly representing an initial unfolding of the *tattvas*.[16] Within the Devī *yantra* the energy is more condensed, suggesting a more concentrated force, a contraction towards the point of absorption. The images emit a very different quality; the black Kālī *yantra* an outward movement, a push away, the Devī *yantra* seeming to absorb and draw in.[17] This was not an interpretation of meaning or content, but rather my direct sensory experience of the imagery. The *yantra* was experienced within the body, which brings to mind Susan Kozel's use of the term 'kinept' in her description of a body-knowing based in the sense of the body in space.[18] Used as a tool for meditation, it is suggested that the structure of the *yantra* resonates with the subtle energy of the body, re-aligning and perfecting. Timalsina explains: 'Tantric images resemble cognitive maps that integrate information acquired through various perceptual modes.'[19]

This initial experience of working with *yantra* stimulated further research into the *yantra* of the *cakras*, and while remaining with *cakra* imagery of the *Sādanamālā,* I placed each individual *yantra* according to the configuration from base to crown, adding the subtle energy channels, the *suṣumnā nāḍi (*central spinal thread), and the *iḍā* and *piṅgalā nāḍi* on the left and right of the figure, representing fire, sun and moon respectively.[20] (See fig. 60) The exercise allowed concentration on each individual *yantra* as I worked, considering its numerology, geometry, colour significance, while also considering its placement within the body.[21] While it is not appropriate to discuss this in detail here, it is important to draw attention to the innate understanding within tantrism, and more specifically *kuṇḍalinī yoga*, that each *cakra* has its specific *yantra.* These are seen as energy centers within the body and the body as a reflection of the cosmos.

16 Literally 'that-ness', the emanation of categories from the most subtle to the gross elements of ether or space, air, fire, water earth. See, for example, Flood, 1996, p. 223; Padoux, 2017, p. 46-47. The *Yoginīhṛidaya* states that the three-fold aspect of *mūlatrikona* combines will, knowledge and action, *iccha-śakti, jnana-śakti, kriya-śakti*, and also the three *guṇas, sattva, rajas*, and *tamas*, where *sattva* is seen as that which manifests, *rajas* as that which acts, and *tamas* as that which veils. See also, John Woodroffe, *An Introduction to Tantra-Śastra*, Ganesh and Co., Madras, reprinted 2017, p. 9

17 These were my personal observations, but were reiterated by a number of observers.

18 Kozel, in Biggs and Karlsson, 2011, p. 215

19 Timalsina, 2017, p. 15

20 There are several ways of describing these subtle channels, which also house further, finer channels within them. See, for example, Woodroffe, 1928, p. 111-114

21 See eg. Satyananda Saraswati, 1984; Woodroffe, 1928; Leadbeater, 1917; Motoyama, 1981. While living in Japan, I studied for several years with Shinto priest and *kuṇḍalinī yoga*/consciousness researcher Hiroshi Motoyama. Motoyama's *Theories of the Chakras*, Theosophical Publishing House, 1981, draws together the work of Woodroffe, Leadbeater and Satyananda Saraswati, while including scientific research on chakras and consciousness.

Fig. 60, The *yantra* of the *cakras*, adapted from the *Sādanamālā*

Cinnabar, orpiment, conch white and carbon black, in hide glue on handmade paper

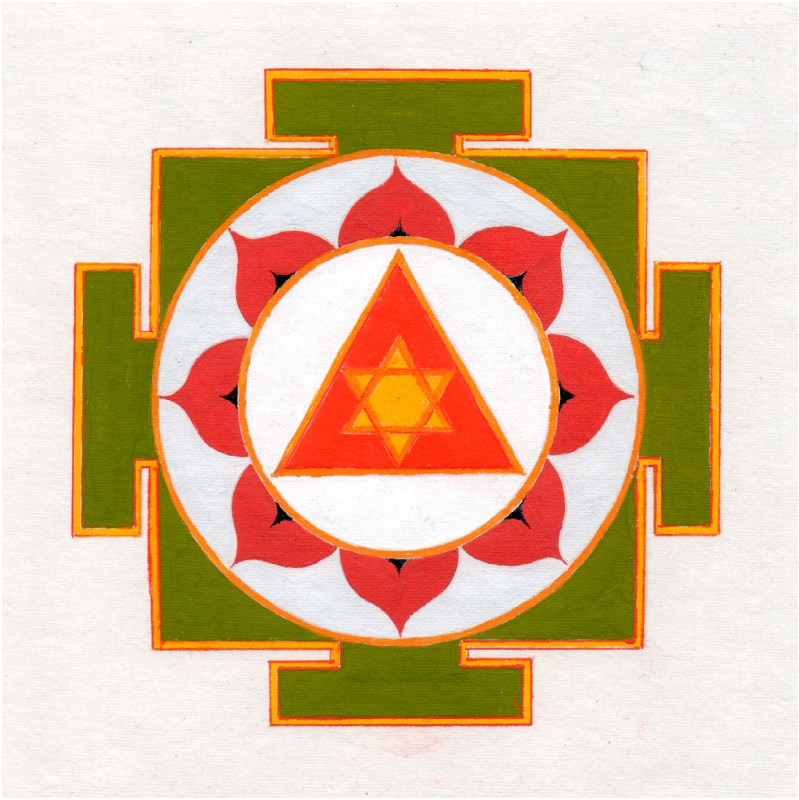

Fig. 61. Ganeśa *yantra;* indigo, *sindur*, piuri yellow, zinc white pigment in gum arabic, on handmade paper

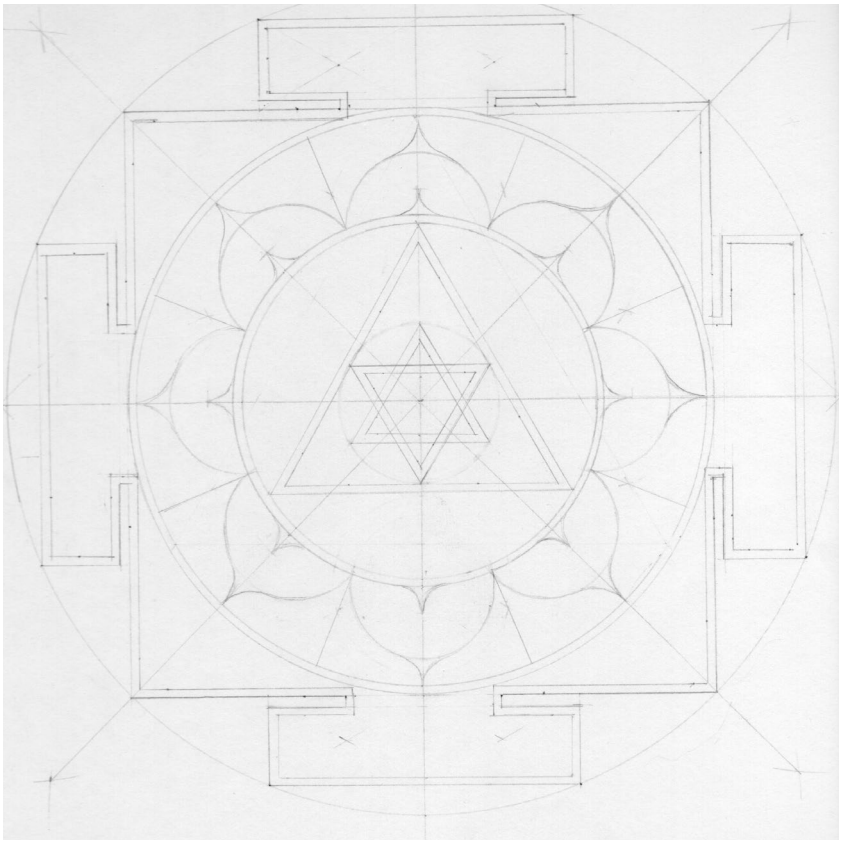

Fig. 61a, Geometric construction for Ganeśa *yantra*

4. 3 *The geometry of the yantra*

In working more closely with the geometry of the *yantra*, I found that it is the haptic process of making, using compass and square, which provides a non-verbal, body-centered, spatially oriented learning. Here I looked at two very different *yantra*, Ganeśa *yantra* and Śiva *yantra*, which were created with the geometrical construction as the focus. The Śiva *yantra* (fig. 62) contains the complex five-fold geometry of the interior pentagon/pentagram, embedded within the four-fold geometry of the eight lotus petals and enclosing square. The pentagon/pentagram reflects the association of Śiva with the number five. Śiva is often depicted with five heads which represent his five activities.[22] Davis explains:

> According to Śaiva philosophy, Śiva performs five fundamental activities (*pañcakṛtya*) that shape and activate the universe. …He "veils" (*tirobhāva*) the true nature of things from bound souls, and he grants "grace" (*anugrāha*) to souls when they are ready for it, liberating them from their bondage. …His other three activities emission (*sṛṣṭi*), maintenance (*sthiti*), and reabsorption (*samhāra*) - bring about the complex evolutions and involutions of the substantive worlds in which souls reside.[23]

The Ganeśa *yantra* (fig. 61), a hexagon within a triangle, emphasises the simpler three-fold geometry, again embedded within the eight-fold lotus petals and enclosing square. This *yantra* can be associated with the *mūlādhāra* or base *cakra* (*mūla*, base, root) within the human body, with the element earth, the square, the yellow colour, and with matter and stability.[24] Figures 61a and 62a show how the geometry depends on the initial establishment of the horizontal and vertical axes, the *brahmasūtra* and *somasūtra* and their intersection at the central *bindu* provides the anchor for construction.

While the painting of the two initial *yantra* (figs. 58 and 59) over a number of weeks demanded extended concentration, here the painting was done quickly. Here the precise rules of the geometry allowed a very different and specific understanding of the way the *yantra* works, how it comes into being and holds together. Fig. 61 shows the final image of the Ganeśa *yantra*, but fig. 61a allows us to see the underlying structure; the invisible threads which hold the form. This earth-based, stable figure is contained by an outer circle, which also provides the measurement for the limit and extension of its gates. The more delicate gates of the Śiva *yantra* are constructed differently, and their extensions depend on small circles drawn from the corners of the containing square, a circle which also provides the measurement for the gate itself (See

22 For example, in the 6th century Śiva rock carving in the Elephanta Caves, where three heads are clearly seen, the back and top 'implied'.

23 Davis, 1991, p. 42-43

24 See, for example, Woodroffe, 1928, p. 332. This section of Woodroffe's *Serpent Power* (which refers to *kuṇḍalini*), is a translation and commentary on the *Ṣat-cakra-Nirūpaṇa* of Purnananda, dated 1550.

Fig. 62, Śiva *yantra;* indigo, *sindur*, zinc white pigment in gum arabic, on handmade paper

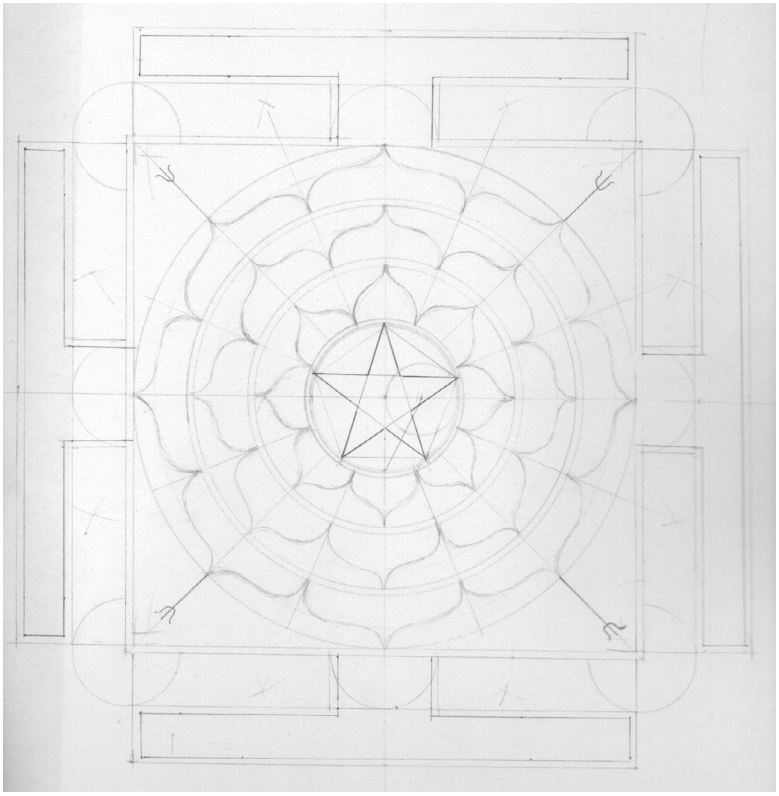

Fig. 62a, Geometric construction for Śiva *yantra*

fig. 62a). The upward-facing triangle and its contained hexagon, provide the Ganeśa *yantra* with a symmetrical stability, a feeling of strength which is obtained through a fairly simple three-fold geometry; the strength and stability of the image reflecting that of the deity. By contrast, the central pentagram of the Śiva *yantra* is complex and while symmetrical in its current position, its five-fold geometry suggests the possibility of a more dynamic movement. The *yantra* is more delicate in its structure, and the pentagram could be seen as an abstract form of Naṭarāja, Śiva dancing the world into being, where the dancing figure of Śiva intersects with its containing ring of fire in five places.

Working with the precision of geometrical construction facilitates a different kind of learning, a different kind of familiarity with the imagery. Following the process of emission and reabsorption in figs. 58 and 59 provided a direct understanding of the liturgy of the *yantra*. Working through the geometry in figs. 61 and 62, even though the construction lines are not seen in the final painting, there is a sense of the invisible threads which hold the image together. This was even more apparent while working with *śrīyantra.*

4. 4 *Śrīyantra*

Dynamic movement is an essential aspect of *śrīyantra*, which is described by Padoux as 'the *maṇḍalic* form of the goddess Tripurasundari, symbolic of her cosmic activity.'[25] And according to Khanna: 'The *śrīcakra* represents the conceptualization of the goddess Tripurā as the cosmos.'[26] The *śrīyantra* represents the processes by which worlds are brought into being through the primal act of manifestation, and by which they are re-absorbed into the formless.[27] Accurate construction of *śrīyantra* (or *śrīcakra)* is essential, and the experience of its making provided insight into both its meaning and function. Whereas working with the single downward-facing triangle of the Devī and Kālī *yantra* provided a feeling of concentrated focus, engaging with *śrīyantra* produced one of lightness and expansion, which I can only describe as energetic or vibratory. There was an awareness of the fragile interconnectedness of things which could easily dissolve and disappear – the intersections of lines acting as nodes in a network, holding everything together. The intense concentration of the *mūlatrikoṇa* in both the Devī and Kālī *yantra* is suggested by the inner lines of the triangle, as if spatial dimensions have been concertinaed and compressed into this single form; a power concentrated until it has no alternative to burst forth into manifestation. With *śrīcakra* the experience is of the diversity of manifestation, but also its precariousness.

25 Andre Padoux, in Bühnemann, 2007, p. 239

26 Khanna, 1986, p. 1

27 As explained in detail in Khanna, 1987

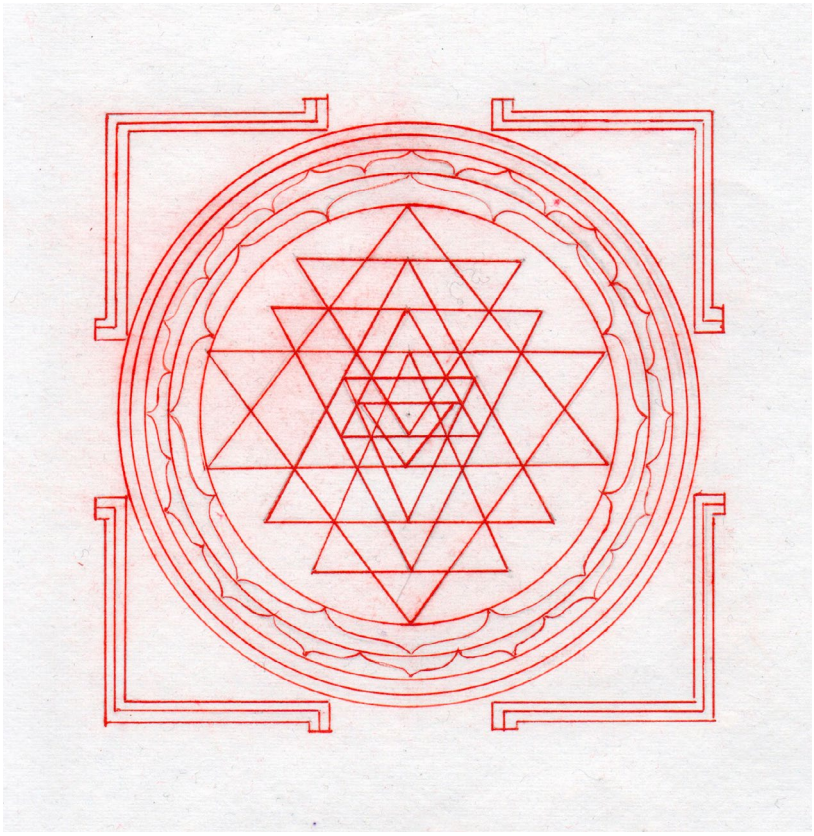

Fig. 63, *Śrīyantra;* cinnabar on handmade paper

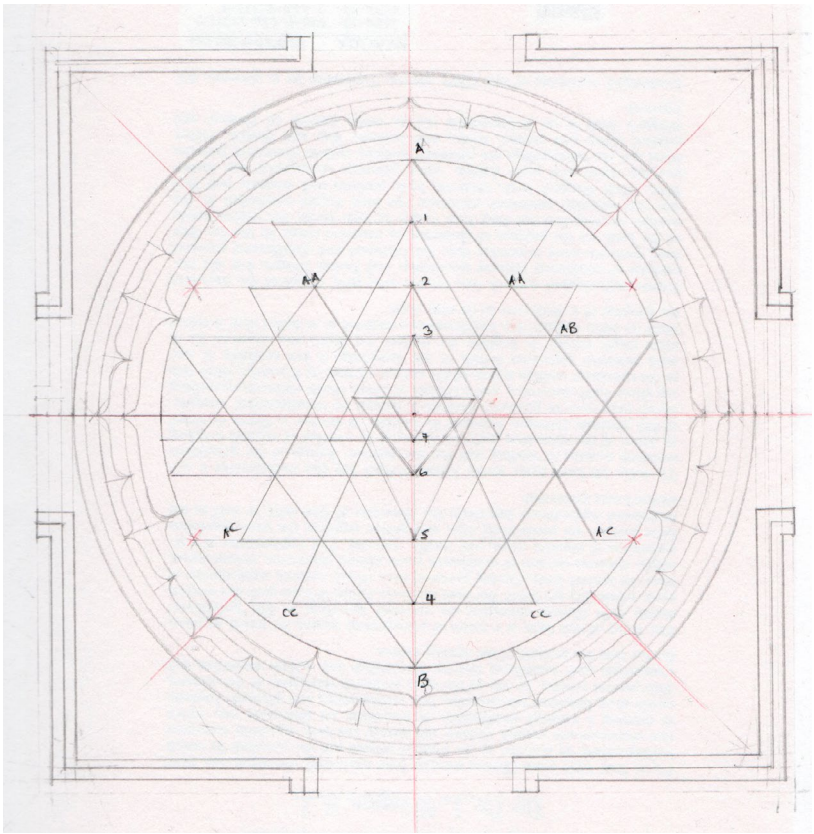

Fig. 63a. *Śrīyantra*, construction

The construction of śrīyantra

There are several possible ways of constructing the *śrīyantra,* which differ according to tradition and lineage. The image shown in fig. 63 employed the most often cited construction method which is found in the commentary by Kaivalyāśrama on the *Saundaryalaharī*, the text attributed to Ādi Śaṅkāra and passed down through the Śrī Vidyā lineage.[28] The *Saundaryalaharī* is a devotional hymn to Tripurasundari, Devī or the divine mother, containing practical guidance on the worship of the goddess. Verse 11 describes her *yantra*:

> The triangles of your abode, forty-three in number, have been formed with the nine fundamental manifestations (*Mūla-Prakṛtis),* four of Śiva *(Śrī-kaṇthas)* and five of Śakti (*Śiva-yuvatis*) along with an eight-petaled lotus and another sixteen-petaled one, three circles and three linear enclosures.[29]

The image in figure 63 was made by dividing the vertical axis (the *brahmasūtra,* heavenly thread) according to specific proportions. Horizontal lines drawn through these dividing points provide the basis for the construction. The accuracy of the initial measurements determines whether the lines of the nine triangles (four of Śiva, five of Śakti) intersect correctly or not. Ramachandra Rao mentions a second *samaya* method, which follows the process of emanation, beginning with the central *bindu* and the drawing of the first triangle. Lines are extended from the initial triangle and subsequent measurements taken from their various intersections.[30]

The complex construction of *śrīyantra* takes time and concentration. At each stage there is doubt that the image will ever come together, odd lines remain suspended in space, until their complexity resolves into a single coherent figure. Finally, if the drawing is accurate, the central downward-pointing triangle, the *mūlatrikoṇa,* while remaining dependent on its structure, floats free of the outer geometry. This root triangle does not intersect with any other. It stands independently, remaining apart from all these complex intersections, reflecting the concept that Śākti, 'while pervading and becoming the manifest cosmos also shares the ontological status and pure consciousness of Śiva.'[31] The goddess is the means of manifestation but also remains detached, unchanged. The center point, from which the initial circle and all other geometries emerged, now

28 This method of constructing the *yantra* is called *saṃhāra krama* and was the method used in a KFSTA workshop with Dr Susana Marin. Dr Marin later explained that this was taught to her through the Śrī Vidyā lineage.

29 *Saundaryalaharī of Śaṅkarācārya*, verse 11, Oriental Institute, University of Baroda, Vadodara. The text of this translation states '43 in number'. 44 is often argued as the correct number as Ādi Śaṅkāra counted the *bindu* as a triangle. (sanskritdocuments.org)

30 Rao, 1982, pp. 21-22. Zimmer, describing the *śrīyantra* as 'the foremost of all linear *yantras*', gives direction for its construction beginning with the root and citing instructions given in Bhaskararaya's commentary on *Nityasidasikarnava*. Zimmer, 1984, pp. 158 and 162

31 Taylor, Kathleen, *Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra and Bengal: 'An Indian Soul in a European Body?'*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxford, 2001 p. 164

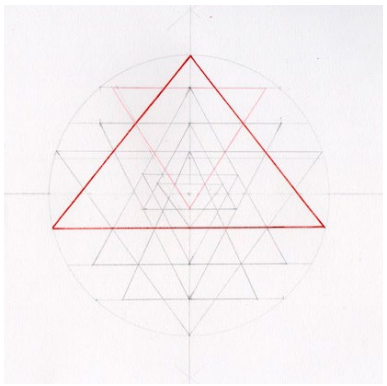

Fig 64a. Stage 1:
Upward facing *śiva* triangle

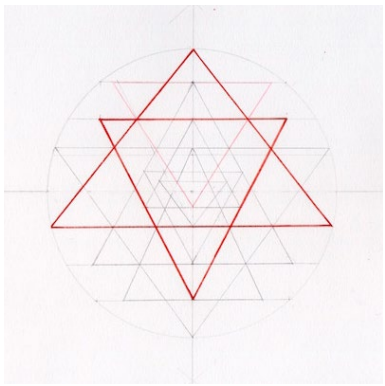

Fig 64b. Stage 2:
Downward facing *śakti* triangle

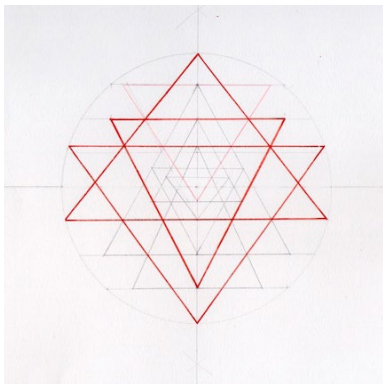

Fig 64c. Stage 3: Second
downward facing *śakti* triangle

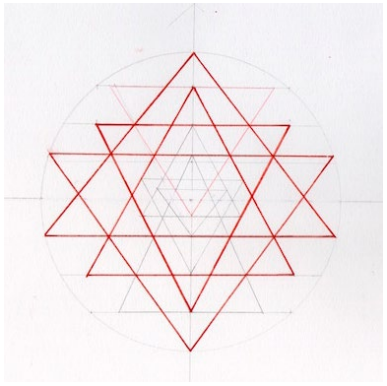

Fig 64d. Stage 4:
Second upward facing *śiva* triangle

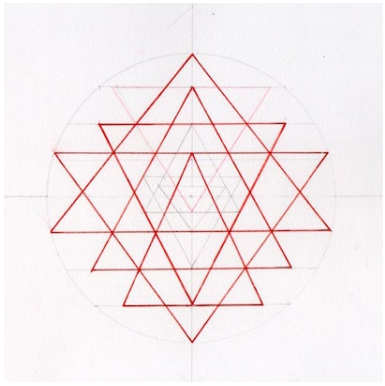

Fig 64e. Stage 5:
Third upward facing *śiva* triangle

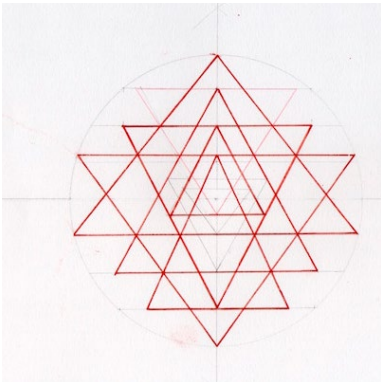

Fig 64f. Stage 6:
Fourth upward facing *śiva* triangle

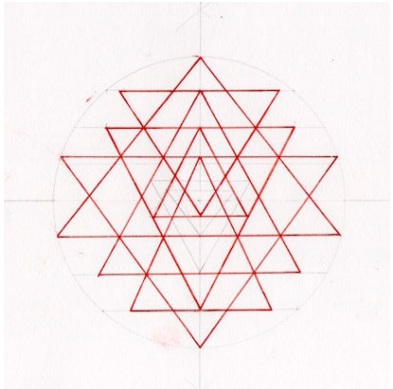

Fig 64g. Stage 7: third
downward facing *śakti* triangle

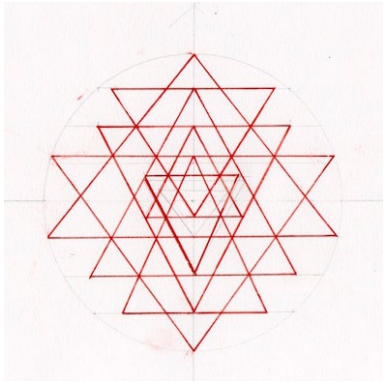

Fig 64h. Stage 8: fourth downward
facing *śakti* triangle

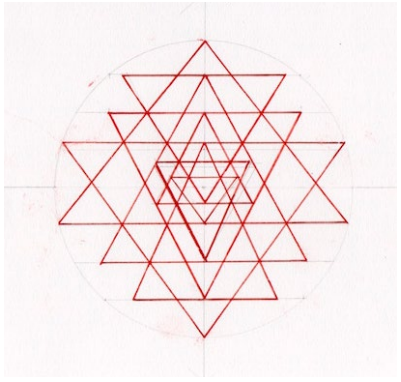

Fig 64i. Stage 5: final
downward facing śakti triangle

Figures 64a-64i show the construction of the Śrīyantra according to a South Indian Śrī Vidya tradition. After making the initial drawing, I traced the triangles in cinnabar pigment in the order of their construction, which differs from the method described in the Saundarya-Lahari.

sits in the center of the final triangle, representing the point of both emanation and reabsorption, the *bindu*.

As the figure gradually emerges, a dynamic tension is created at the points of intersection (*marmans*),[32] most clearly seen when simply traced with a line, as in fig. 63. The line here is traced with cinnabar (*śingraf*). The construction of the *śrīyantra*, with its web-like entanglements, seems to convey something of the construction of matter itself. It is reminiscent of the spinning of a spider web, a common theme in Vedic literature, which reflects the ability of the spider to draw thread from within itself to spin its complex web of patterns. 'As the spider spins out and draws in its threads …so does the world spring from the imperishable.'[33] It could also be an illustration of the Net of Indra, which represents the interconnectedness of all things. The experience of working with the images of *śrīyantra* suggested the vibratory patterns of string theory and the 'spooky action-at-a-distance' interactions encountered in quantum entanglement.[34] Its intersections need to be perfect, otherwise the whole web of reality may fall apart. A slight discrepancy here, and it will be reflected in all other intersections.

While still concentrating on the linear expression of *śrīyantra,* I worked on a different method of construction, originating in South India, and transmitted by Devī devotee Sri Samba Sadashiva Sastry of Hyderabad.[35] This provided a different experience of the making, as the construction relied less on the initial measurement along the vertical axis, but emerged from the inner integrity of the design itself (figs. 64 a-i). Various lines were created from the intersections of others, rather than from external measurement, a process which gave the design an integrated quality – a dependence on its own inner structure and coherence.

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32 It is interesting to note that *marman* is also the term used in Ayurveda to describe the points in the body, where two *nāḍi*, or lines of energetic force meet.

33 See eg. Katz and Egenes (translators), *The Upanishads, Mundaka Upanishad*. p. 89. Originally a Vedic term describing a vast net in which the god Indra holds the universe, and potentially keeps it captive, or in a state of magical illusion, Indra's net was also used in Mahayana Buddhism as a metaphor for the inter-connectedness of all things; the underlying structure of the universe in which each detail is a reflection of the whole; '…all the different phenomena in all worlds are interrelated in Indra's net'.

34 A phrase coined by Einstein to convey the unexplained phenomena of quantum entanglement. See eg: www.science.org/content/article/einstein-s-spooky-action-distance. Entanglement is explained by Shantena Sabbadini as, 'the existence of correlations at a distance which cannot be explained by any causal mechanism between systems physically separated.' Shantena Sabbadini, *Pilgrimages to Emptiness, Rethinking Reality through Quantum Physics*, Pari Publishing, Pari, 2017, p. 56

35 This was method was passed through a Śrī Vidyā lineage to Lalita Kapilavia, a research student at KFSTA, to Dr Marin. I later communicated with Lalita directly via email, and she confirmed the importance of the intersections: 'The instructions are in Telugu, one of the South Indian languages. A great significance is given to the intersections in its drawing. It is said that only then the Yantra attains its power. Prayers are offered to the Goddess before it is drawn seeking divine guidance as it is believed that every act in the process is inspired by Her and completing it is possible only by the divine will. An auspicious day and time is also chosen to begin.'

The liturgy of śrīyantra

While working on the construction of *śrīyantra,* I simultaneously engaged with the writings of Davis and Khanna, which provided an interesting exchange of experiential-sensorial and text-based understanding. Khanna insists on the 'inseparable relationship of the concept and liturgy of the *śrīcakra,',* and while engaging in making of *śrīyantra* I was reminded of her words: 'The worshiper, who is identical with the Absolute, Śiva, enacts at each performance of the worship the cyclic act of cosmic evolution and involution.'[36]

Śrīyantra is essentially a pattern of nine interwoven triangles, four representing the principle of pure consciousness (Śiva) and five the principle of the power of manifestation (Śakti). This is most clearly seen in figs 64a-i. Within the *śrīyantra* the complex interweaving of *śiva-śakti* represents the materialization and subsequent dissolution and re-absorption of material form.[37] As Davis points out, the paths of emission and reabsorption are followed in both ritual and inner concentration. 'The notions of emission and reabsorption embody an ontological principle at the same time as they describe a cosmological process.'[38] The ritual use of *śrīyantra* literally embodies these processes; the devotee understands the *yantra* as the body of the divine goddess, but also as reflected in their own being. The processes of emission (*sṛṣṭi*) and reabsorption (*samhāra*), and the concept of veiling and unveiling, underly both the construction and ritual use of the *yantra*. The process of making the *yantra* is an enactment of ritual, and became the focus of working with these images.

The avarāṇas, veils or coverings

The intersections of the nine triangles, the lotus circles, and outer circles and squares create what are called the enclosures, or *avarāṇas* (see fig. 65). Often translated as veils, the *avarāṇas* represent the coverings of the ultimate reality by *māyā*. This is not so much "illusion", as *māyā* is often translated, but an increasing density (of matter or ignorance) which veils the light of consciousness, while simultaneously facilitating the experience of the material world. Moving from the exterior, the first enclosure is the external square, which represents the earth and is bordered by three lines. On each side is a gateway. Three concentric circles surround the sixteen petaled lotus, creating the second enclosure. The third enclosure is an eight petaled lotus; the fourth the initial configuration of the fourteen external triangles; the fifth consists of ten triangles; the sixth a second configuration of ten; the seventh, eight triangles; the eighth is the inner, downward facing root triangle, and the ninth, the *bindu* (figs. 66a-66e).[39] The *bindu* is

36 Khanna, 1986, p. 19-20

37 Khanna, 1986

38 Davis, 1991, p. 43

39 Ramachandra Rao, *Sri-Chakra, Its Yantra, Mantra and Tantra*, India Books Centre, Delhi, 1982 (2003) p. 26-49; Khanna, 1986, p. 110-111

Fig. 65, *Sriyantra* showing the *avarāṇas*

the gateway to the Absolute, the formless, and the path of emission moves from the formless, through the stages of manifestation to the final earth square.

Both Davis and Khanna describe this movement of emission through the theory of the 36 *tattvas*,[40] the 'constituent units of manifest being',[41] a cosmogenetic process from pure consciousness, *Paramaśiva,* to the most solid earth *tattva,* represented by the square of the *bhūpura.* Gavin Flood similarly explains various Śaiva Siddhānta ritual systems as involving 'a ritual reabsorption of the *tattvas*'.[42] Khanna's dissertation follows this movement within the *śrīyantra*, describing the reabsorption process from the outer square enclosure through the various *āvaranas*, veils or coverings, to the root triangle, *mūlatrikona*.[43] 'Whatever has emerged from the Supreme light of awareness must inevitably reverse its course and merge back into its source.'[44]

40 An important distinction between the Sāmkya and Śaiva Siddhānta traditions is that the Sāmkya schools designate 25 *tattvas*. Flood 2006, p. 127; Davis, 1990, p. 43 (Also Appendix II)

41 Davis, 1990, p. 43

42 Gavin Flood, *The Tantric Body: The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion*, I. B. Taurus, London, 2006, p. 127

43 Khanna, 1989, p. 122 - 149

44 Khanna, 1989, p. 152

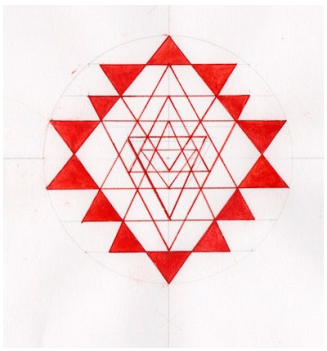


Fig. 66a: Fourteen outer triangles relating to the manifest cosmos

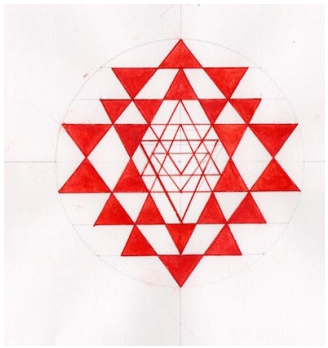


Fig. 66b: The addition of the ten triangles relating to the manifest cosmos

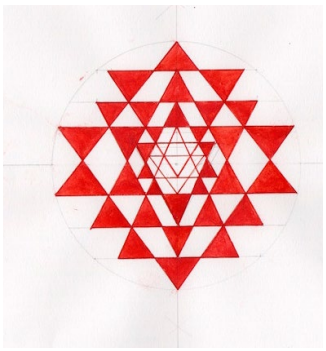


Fig. 66c: Ten inner triangles relating to the manifest cosmos (*tattvas*)

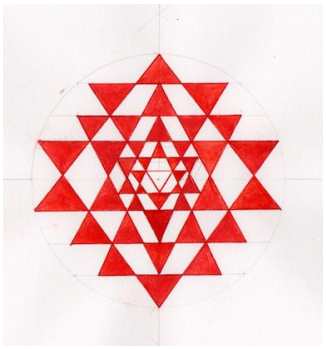


Fig. 66d: Eight triangles relating to the inner structure of the cosmos

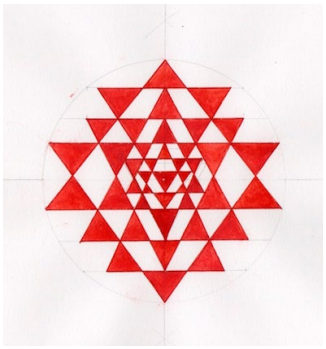


Fig. 66e: One central triangle representing the unmanifest

Figs 66a-66e. The progression of painting the inner structure of *śrīyantra*. When relating to the complete diagram, the outer square, the *bhūpura*, and the two lotus rings releate to individual consciousness: the *bhūpura* to waking consciousness, the 16 petalled lotus to dreaming and the 8 petalled lotus to deep sleep. The series of 14 and 10 triangles to the *tattvas* (or constituent parts of both matter and consciousness); the series of eight triangles, the root triangle and the *bindu* to the unmanifest, and sometimes related to *sat-cit-ananda,* being-consciousness-bliss. (See footnote 39.)

When discussing the ritual processes related to both *yantra* and temple practice within *Śaiva* Siddhānta, Davis states:

> What is important is that it [temple, *yantra*] have a centre and outer elements constituting its peripheries, arranged as concentric "circuits" of locations. … Movement from the center outward follows the path of emission, while movement from peripheries inward toward the center follows the path of reabsorption.[45]

45 Davis, 1991, p. 6. In his study of the Śaiva Siddhānta tradition of mediaeval South India, Davis explains that depending on the desired outcome, the aspirant may use ritual in order to bring something to manifestation, or as a return to the formless, suggesting that the former may be the practice of the householder, the second of the ascetic or renouncer. Davis 1991, p. 46

Comparing the *śrīcakra* to the iconic image of the goddess, Khanna points to its dynamic nature, defining the term *cakra* as something that is continually spinning and in motion: 'This is the key point at which the *śrīcakra* differs from a traditional *pratimā*, a pictorial icon of the deity which is essentially a static configuration and does not contain any dynamic element in its conception.'[46] While working with the *pratimā* image of Devī instilled an intense concentrated power, the *śrīcakra* is a very different expression of this power and dynamism, incorporating movement and change, interrelationship and inter-dimensionality. This is the activity of the goddess, not a mere diagram but a 'divine cosmic process … a cosmic event, a reality.'[47] As a non-figurative image it also communicates on a different level, as an energetic patterning which pre-figures form – Mukhyopadhyaya's 'principle of control'.

Working with *śrīyantra* proved to be a deeply immersive and profound experience. Reading Khanna's seminal dissertation,[48] along with Davis's study of ritual, while engaged with the practical construction of the *yantra* provided a rich cross-fertilization of the theoretical and practical aspects of research. While Khanna's dissertation focuses on more external ritual usage, Padoux, drawing on the text of the 11th century *Yoginīhṛdaya,* explains the use of *śrīcakra* in meditation, where the *avarāṇas* are visualized within the *cakras* of the body of the devotee.[49] He also describes a process of visualization which relates to the nine triangles aligned along the central *brahmasūtra* thread. A similar visualization is described by Rao in his translation of the 18th c Śri Vidya text the *Sāṛadā-catusśatikā.*[50] Padoux and Rao stress that in ritual, the *yantra* may be envisaged as the body of the practitioner, as well as the body of the goddess. And Khanna states, 'The goddess's identity is not limited to the external world alone but extends to the subtle body (*sūkṣmaśarīra*) of the adorer, conceived as a microcosm.'[51]

> The greatest of all *yantras*, the *śrīyantra*, devoted to the worship of the goddess, is a visual masterpiece of abstraction, flawless in its proportions and symmetry. The technique of its construction is outlined in a number of texts, and is a unique and complete rite.[52]

46 Khanna, 1986, p. 116

47 Padoux, in Bühnemann, 2007, p. 240

48 Andre Padoux claims Khanna's dissertation as the definitive study of *śrīyantra.* Bühnemann, 2007, p. 248

49 According to Padoux, this text is considered to be a work of the 11th century probably of Kashmiri origin. Padoux, in Bühnemann (ed.), 2007, p. 240-242

50 S. K. Ramchandra Rao, *The Tantric Practices of Śri-Vidyā*, Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, 2005

51 Khanna, 1986, p. 90

52 Khanna, 2003, p. 134-135

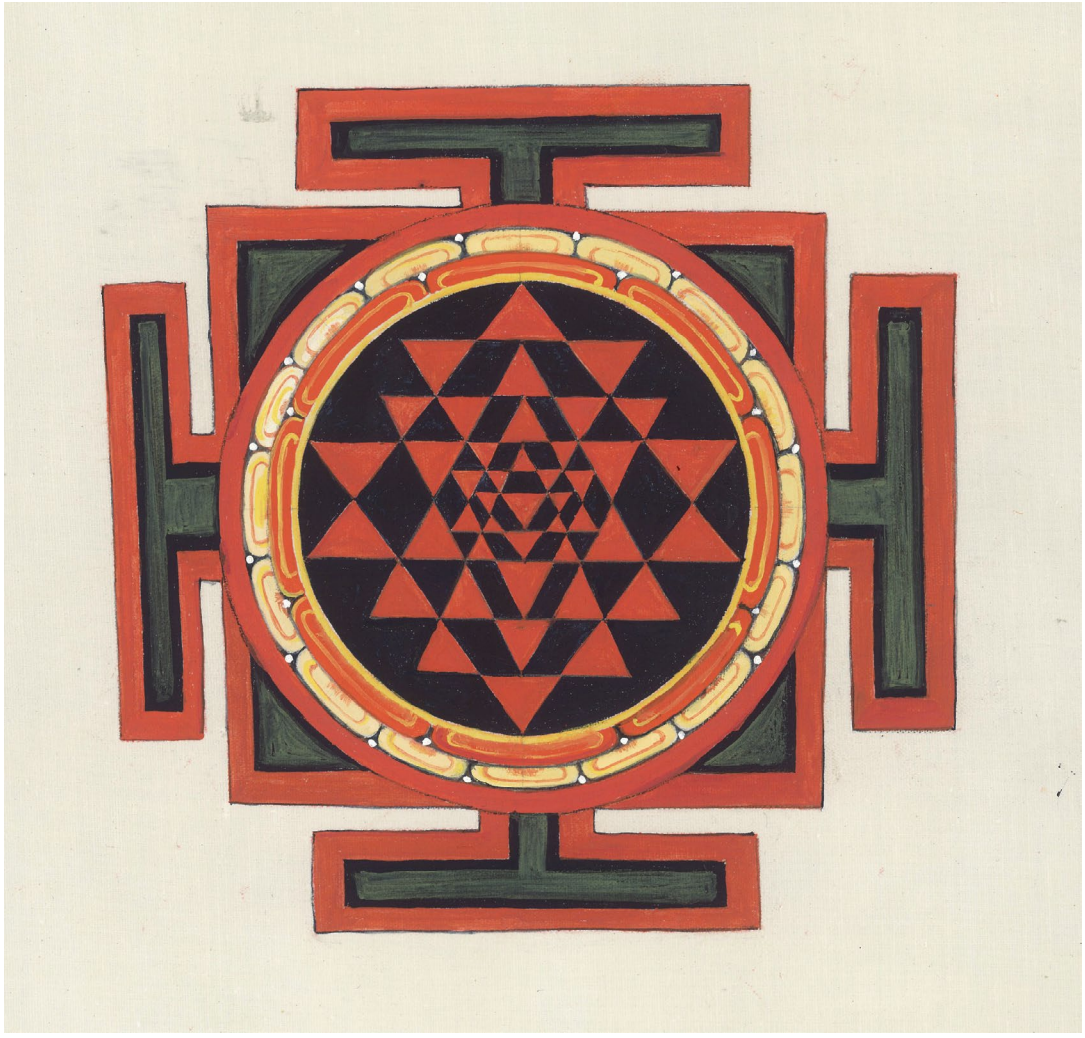


Fig. 67, *Śrī-yantra* based on an image from the *Sadānamāla*.
Cinnabar, orpiment, conch white, indigo in hide glue, on Nepali linen canvas

4. 5 *Perfections and Imperfections*

I returned to the *Sadānamāla* for inspiration for two further *yantra* paintings, a Kālī *yantra* and a *śrīyantra* (figs. 67 and 68). Time had passed since the painting of the original Devī and Kālī images (figs. 58 and 59), time in which I had visited the Bharat Kala Bhavan in Varanasi, and spent time with the *Sadānamāla,* slowly looking through its over 100 or more images and closely observing their texture and quality. This was clearly a well-used object, a kind of visual prayer book. The paintings looked surprisingly fresh and immediate, and had a hand drawn quality which was not apparent in reproduction. The colours were lively and heightened by a protective coating of glaze. The Kālī *yantra* I had previously copied from a reproduction was not black after all, but a dark indigo blue/green. The geometry of the figures was less precise, the walls of the *bhūpura* slightly out of alignment. This seemed to give each *yantra* its own dynamism and personality, something that I wanted to bring to these two final *yantra* paintings (figs. 67 and 68). Rather than carefully

Fig. 68, *Kalī-yantr*a based on an image from the *Sadānamāla*.
Cinnabar, orpiment, conch white, indigo in hide glue, on Nepali linen canvas

constructing the geometry as I had done previously, I decided to follow the inconsistencies of the *Sadānamāla*, resisting the temptation to straighten slightly bent lines or make the nonparallel parallel. I became more aware of the space between things, space that allowed movement. The *mūlatrikoṇa* in figure 68 needed to float free of its containing circle rather than firmly attaching to it, allowing it to remain on the brink of the formless. The spaces between gave the whole figure less solidity, more vibrational energy.

Having previously constructed *śrīyantra* only in linear form, the more fully painted image brought different challenges and insights (fig. 67). As with the linear form, the meeting points (*marmans*) were crucial, but here it was not simply the meeting of line, but of surface. And as with the single triangle, these points of contact, or almost no contact, gave the image its energy; too close and the movement would be stopped; too much space and there would be no

transmission. Like an electric current passing from point to point, or jumping from neuron to neuron, it required just the right kind of contact. These spaces and non-spaces, perfections and imperfections, became the obsession with these two *yantra* images, and continued through to later phases of the research.

The *yantra* in figures 67 and 68 were made on fine Nepali linen canvas, and the palette was the same as for the previous *yantra* paintings (cinnabar, orpiment, conch white). Indigo was substituted for black, which gave the images more lightness and dynamism. Working with these two paintings I deliberately used the "imperfections" of the originals rather than attempting to straighten the crooked, align the horizontals and verticals. While I had begun my studies of *śrīyantra* working with ruling pen, compass and square, this immersion and attention to the hand-drawn line seemed to give the image a depth and presence. I increasingly preferred the slight inconsistencies of the hand-drawn, the perfection within imperfection, and was reminded of Jacquelynn Baas's comment on Agnes Martin's line:

> The result is a tender luminosity that emerges not so much from the canvas or the colour as on the mind of the observer, a luminosity generated by the exhilarating dissonance between our perception of imperfection within an experience of perfection.[53]

Yuan dynasty painter Chun Yen Yuan states, 'If one makes use of marking line and ruler, the result will be dead painting.'[54] Yuan made his remarks within the very different context of Chinese landscape painting, but his statement was in my mind each time I approached the painting of *yantra*, where geometric accuracy vied with aesthetic appeal. How much did the functionality of the *yantra* as a "tool" depend on this accuracy? A computer-generated perfection is dead and lifeless, and maybe it is always the struggle between the perfect image in the mind and the transmission through the human hand which creates not just the beauty of the image but also its authenticity.

4. 6 *Sarvatobhadra, liṅgatobhadra: grid yantra and square maṇḍala*

The *yantra* considered in this section are based on a grid structure, and are usually constructed on the ground, following the same directional (E/W-N/S) orientation as the *yantra* considered above. While they may differ in structure and complexity, these *yantra/maṇḍala* are all based on the grid, and have their foundation in the spatial orientation of the Hindu temple or altar. They are a kind of floor map to contain a ritual or visualization process which invariably involves an

53 Jacquelynn Baas, *Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy and Western Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2005, p. 213

54 Attributed to Chang Yen-Yüan (ca. 847), quoted in Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting,* Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2012, p. 62

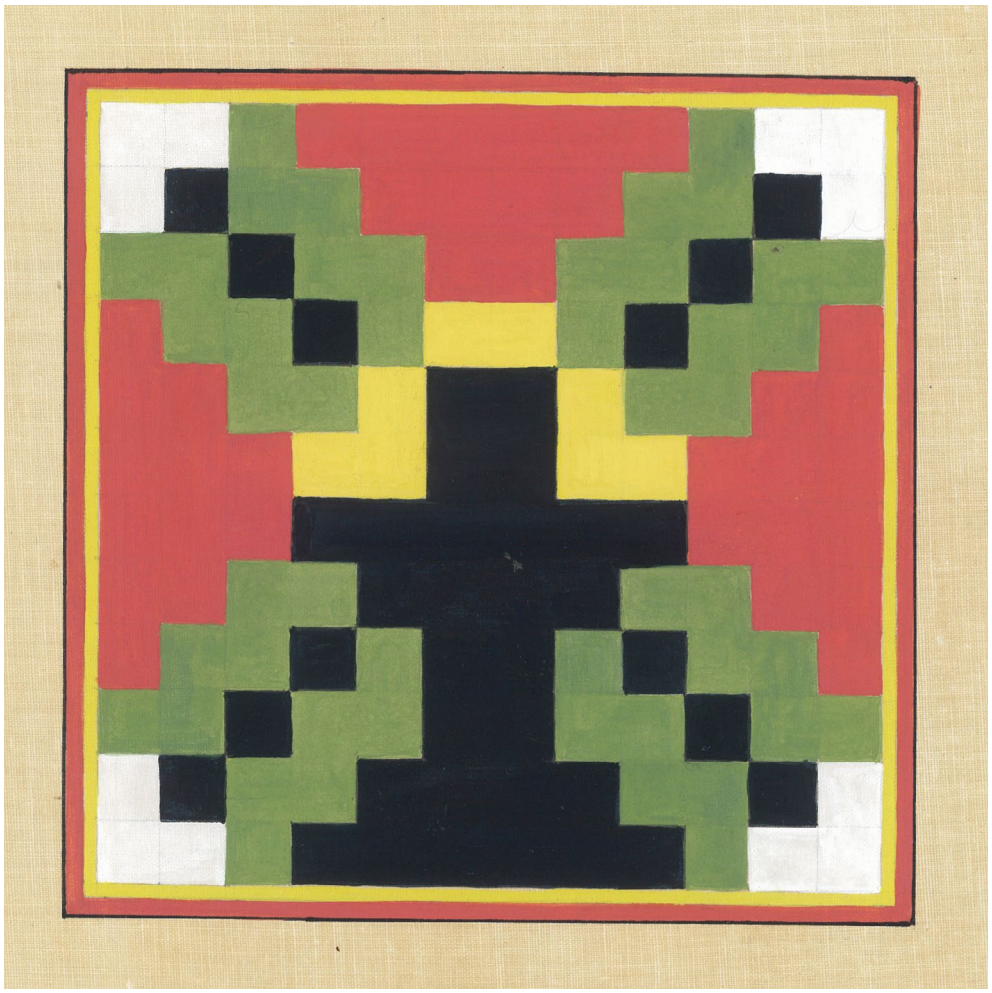


Fig. 69, *Ekaliṅgatobhadra*
Cinnabar, orpiment, indigo, conch white in animal hide glue on hemp canvas

approach to the center. Whether constructed on the ground as a ritual space, painted on paper or conceived in the mind, these are maps which act as a guide towards a central point, which reflects the central deity of the temple structure.[55]

Bhadramaṇḍala is a general term for these grid-based *yantra*; the *liṅgatobhadra* (eg. fig. 69) are associated with Śiva, whereas the *sarvatobhadra* (eg. fig. 70), which can include circles and lotuses at the center (eg. fig. 57), are generally associated with Viṣṇu. The formless aspect of Śiva is represented by the stylized, grid-constructed black *liṅga*, and Gudrun Bühnemann states that the *liṅgatobhadra* may contain from one to 1008 *liṅgas*.[56] The grid *yantra* referred to as *hari-hara liṅgatobhadras* contain both *Vaiṣṇava* (Viṣṇu, *Hari*) and *Śaiva* (Śiva, *Hara*) attributes (figs. 71, 72). While *bhadramaṇḍalas* are not always so obviously concerned with circumnavigation,

55 Judit Törzök, 'Icons of Inclusivism: Maṇḍalas in some early Śaiva Tantras', in Bühnemann (ed.). 2007, p. 185-187

56 Gudrun Bühnemann, 'Maṇḍalas and Yantras in Smārta Ritual', in Bühnemann (ed.), 2007, p. 76

Fig. 70, *Sarvatobhadra*
Cinnabar, orpiment, conch white in gum arabic on *vasli* paper

Hélène Brunner describes an aspect of the *sarvatobhadra* as the part where 'the officiant moves around …as he would in the temple'.[57]

Bühnemann cites the names of specific forms found in the grid *yantra*, and their designated colours, based on her study of the 19th century text the *Bhadramartanda*. The white corners, (as seen in figs. 69 and 70) are called crescent moon; the black obliques, the chain; the green obliques, the creeper; the yellow square, the enclosure; the white shapes, the well; the red, something she translates as 'offset' – and usually the *bhadra* itself. From the information given in her text, it is difficult to know whether these designations have a particular ritual significance, or whether they may be simply the jottings or memory aids of an artisan. But Bühnemann is very precise on the colours of the outer borders of the square, which has three lines, one red, one black, one white or yellow, representing the three *guṅas*, or original manifestation of consciousness, *rajas*, *tamas* and *sattva*, respectively. While painting the grid *yantra*, I speculated on possible associations of

57 Hélène Brunner, 'Maṇḍala and Yantra in the Siddhānta', in Bühnemann (ed.), 2007, p. 169

Fig. 71, *Hari-Hara yantra* using 23 x2 3 grid
based on an illustration in Joost van den Bergh, 2016

colour with the four directions and also the five basic *bhūtas* (or elements). Rastelli also suggests this association in her discussion of *yantra* and *maṇḍala* in the *Pāñcarātra*.[58]

While the early Kālī, Devī and *śrīyantra* were made after receiving instruction, and enhanced by researching the liturgy behind the imagery, working with the grids was essentially experiential. I initially worked with the imagery while knowing little of their intended usage, which provided an opportunity to further evaluate the possibility of 'knowing by doing'. Whereas the circular *yantra/maṇḍala* may be painted and used as devotional or meditative images, for personal use or in temple sanctuaries, the grid *yantra* tend to be made for specific, often initiatory, rituals and then destroyed. The simplest grids most clearly reflect their possible origin in the Vedic altar, but as the grid becomes more complex, it conveys a multiplicity of qualities and forms.

The first study (fig. 69) was of a single Śiva *liṅga* or *ekaliṅgatobhadra,* based on a modern print found on a street stall in Varanasi (see fig. 7), an image also referenced by Khanna.[59] Fig. 70

58 Marion Rastelli, 'Maṇḍalas and Yantras in the Pāñcarātra', in Bühnemann (ed.), 2007, p. 141
59 Khanna, 2003 (1979), p. 137

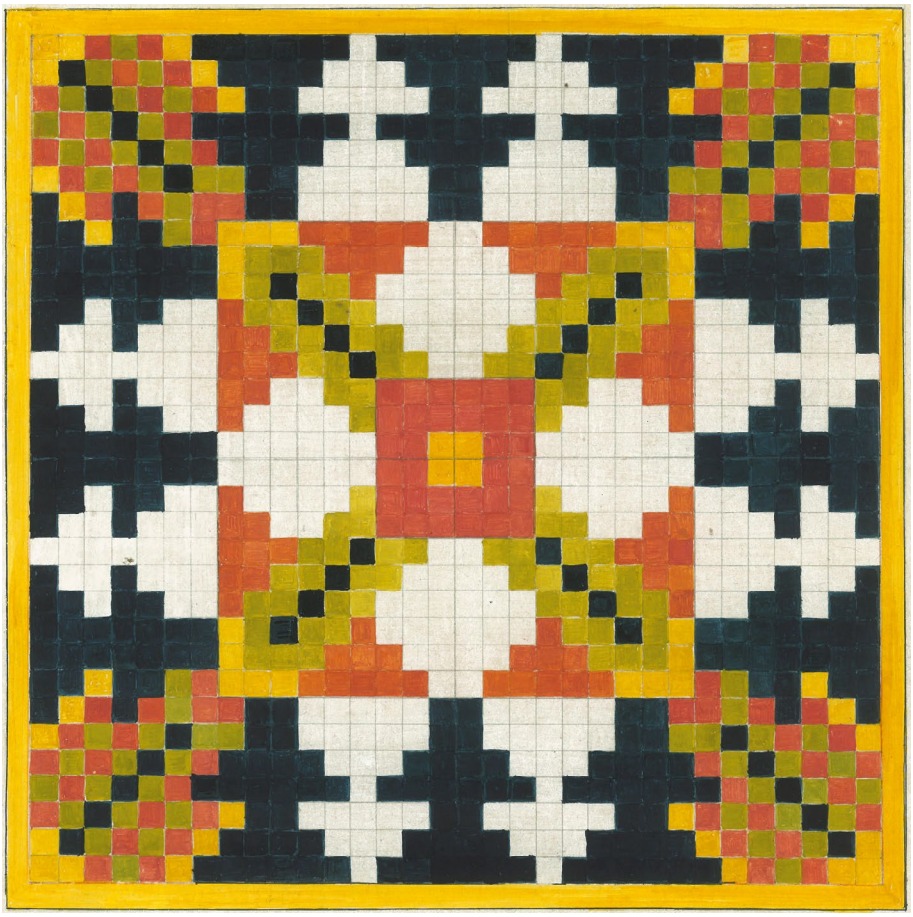


Fig. 72. Checkerboard *Hari-Hara yantra* based on 32 x 32 grid
based on an illustration in Joost van den Bergh, 2016

was sourced from the collections of Joost van den Bergh, and is the basic *sarvatobhadra.*[60] The two more complex grids (figs 71 and 72), described by van den Bergh as 'Checkerboard *Hari-Hara yantra*', combine both Śiva and Viṣṇu imagery, and are generally named according to the number of *liṅga* in the design. The images represented here include the following grids: 12 x 12, 18 x 18, 23 x 23, 32 x 32.

From the beginning of the painting process, it seemed clear to me that the squares must remain independent of each other. Rather than applying blocks of colour, which would have made the application of paint much easier, it was important to construct the painting square by square, layer by layer. I followed the process from periphery to center, spiraling around as I was originally instructed for the *maṇḍala yantra*, and as I progressed, I found that patterns emerged from the painting process itself. The ritual process of 'preparing the ground' is reflected in this construction of the *yantra* on paper, and the slow circumnavigation of the space from periphery to center, as square by square the design is completed, reflects a similar ritual. The emergence

60 Joost van den Berg, *Magic Markings*, Joost van den Berg & Ridinghouse, London, 2016, p. 12

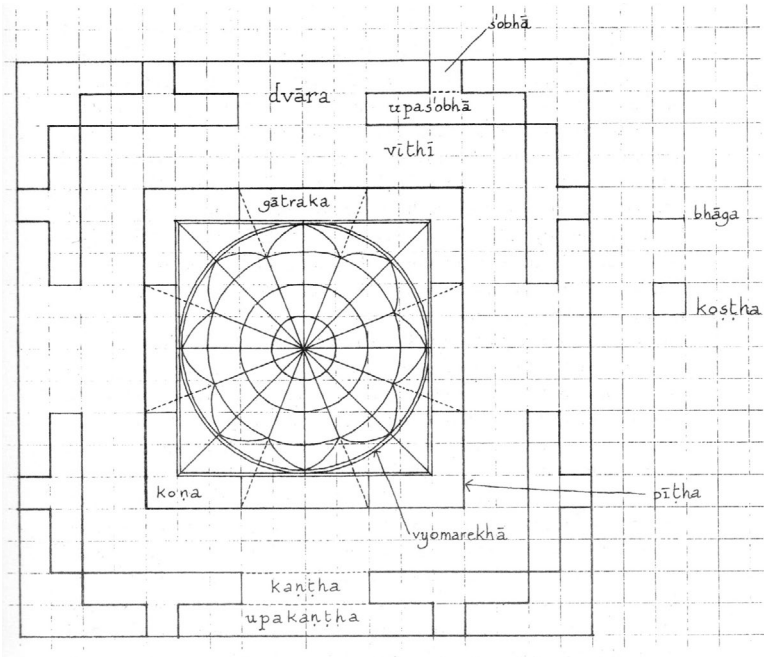
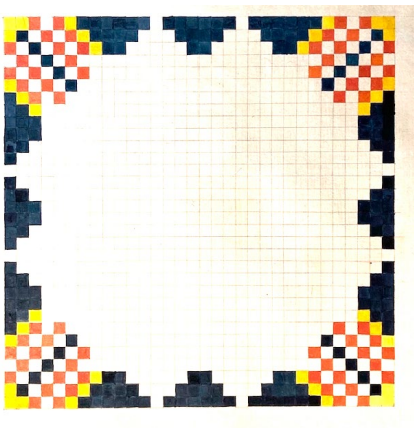


Fig. 74. *Bhadramaṇḍala*, after Törzök, in Bühnemann (ed.), 2007

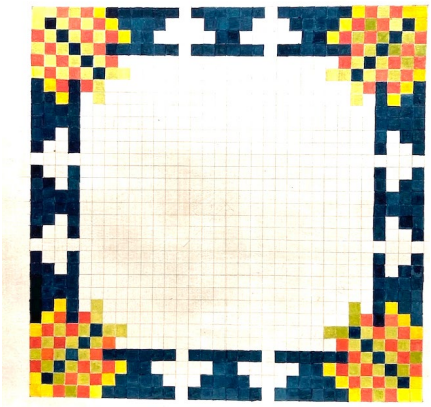
of the shapes and the complexity of their inter-dependence, form yet another kind of grid/net evoking concepts of emission and reabsorption. I became fascinated by these emerging patterns and began to follow this development (see figs 73a-73f). Fig. 72 is particularly interesting as the interaction and interdependence of the black and white *liṅga* shapes gradually becomes clear as the painting process progresses, finally emerging only as the pattern nears completion. Each shape is both dependent on and a reflection of the other, and provides a visual and experiential example of the *Hari-Hara,* Viṣṇu-Śiva interdependent polarity. Seeing the patterns emerge as each separate square is added to the grid design strengthened the concept of a web-like interdependence, but one of a very different nature to that represented by the *śrīcakra* – less dynamic, more fixed in time and space.

I constructed the first *bhadramaṇḍalas* by marking along the sides of a square to create a grid. I later discovered through literature research that, here too, the first imprint is traditionally the construction of an E/W–N/S axis.[61] If on the ground, which will have been flattened and prepared for ritual, strings are covered with some kind of pigment or paste, and stretched across the space – leaving a trace of colour. The resultant squares, the *pada* or *koṣṭha,* are grouped to make up the various elements. The basic colours used, black, white, red, yellow, green-blue, seem to be consistent. If made on the ground, the design is filled with powders and grains, and only remains for the duration of the ritual. Most extant *maṇḍalas* are therefore those on paper, which are generally small and quite portable, but probably made as reference for their ritual construction. Both Khanna and Bühnemann have remarked that the *bhadramaṇḍalas*

61 Bühnemann (ed.), 2007, p. 122



73a



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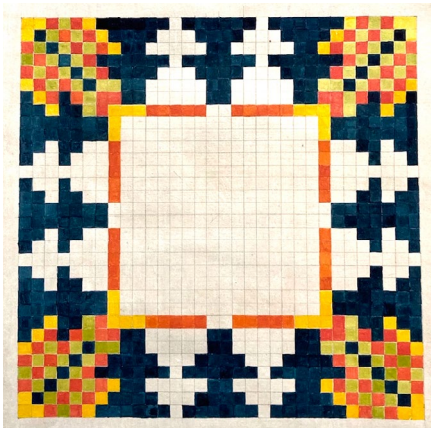

73d

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73f

Figures 73 a-f show the gradual emergence of the black *liṅga* and its white counterpart in the construction of the Checker-board Hari-Hara *yantra* (fig. 72)

Fig. 75, Author's copy of *Hari-Hara*, Mankot, Himachal Pradesh, c. 1700
Orpiment, indigo, cinnabar, zinc white pigment in gum arabic on *vasli* paper

used today tend to be mass produced, sometimes quite roughly printed, and found on sale in temple precincts.[62] I also discovered a construction method for the basic *yantra* of circle, lotus and square enclosure using the grid (fig. 74),[63] which provided the basis for the construction of a floor *yantra*.

62 Khanna, 2003 (1979), p. 137-140; Bühnemann 2007,

63 Judit Törzök, following the text of the *Śāradātilaka* for construction of *śrimaṇḍala*, in Bühnemann (ed.), 2007, p. 219 Here the *yantra* is constructed according to the units (*kostha*) of the grid; i.e., the central square measures 8 x 8 *kothas*.

The *ekaliṅgatobhadra* with its central Śiva *liṅga* is the most simply powerful of the images, added complexity brings diversity, demands greater concentration in its making, and involves patterns within patterns which emerge as the painting goes through its different stages (figs. 33a-33f). While working with the *Hari-Hara* grids, I also painted a figurative image of the joint form of *Viṣṇu-Śiva* (fig. 75). This is a copy of an early (c. 1700) image from the Stella Kramrisch collections at the Philadelphia Museum, called simply *Hari-Hara.* While this is a fascinating image, for me it does not convey the same quality of information as the non-figurative imagery. A concept which is expressed so clearly and beautifully in the an-iconic image (fig. 72), and which becomes clearer in the making process, does not have the same depth of experiential information in its iconic form. Although I found the process of working with the grid *yantra* absorbing, it held less significance for me. These were images more suited to ritual use.The paintings on paper seemed to be more for reference, than for use in their own right.

4. 7 *Mūlatrikoṇa, bindu and kāmakalā*

Before moving on to work with a different source of imagery, I returned to reflect back on an image from the *Sadānamāla*, the *viṣvayoni cakra*, which I had made in the early stages of the research (fig. 76). This *yantra* illustrates the subtle dimensions of the central triangle of the *yantra* and the *bindu,* and its meaning become clearer as I became familiar with Khanna's research and the text of the *Kāmakalā-vilāsa*. Within this image, the root triangle (*mūlatrikona*) contains the central dot (*mahābindu*) which in turn contains *kāmakalā*. My understanding of this image was clarified and explicated through Khanna's description of the path of reabsorption into the center of the *śrīyantra*, through the primal triangle to the Absolute formlessness which lies beyond. The image explores this inner structure of the *mūlatrikoṇa,* moving through the centre of *śrīyantra* to the *kāmakalā.*

The term *kāmakalā* is sometimes ascribed to the root triangle itself, but within the text of the *Kāmakalā-vilāsa* it refers to the subtle composition of the *bindu*. This is described as an inverted triangle containing the seeds of the unmanifest.[64] While the *mūlatrikoṇa* (root triangle) is the initial phase of manifestation, within the triangle of *kāmakalā* the three primary forces remain in potential. *Kāmakalā* is described by Woodroffe as, 'the first display of activity in the Brahman Substance after Pralaya when the Devī holds absorbed in herself all the thirty-six *tattvas* of which the universe in all its variety is composed. …The movement, or stress, of the desire to create manifests as the *kāmakalā*.'[65]

64 Khanna, 1986, p. 121

65 Woodroffe, 1922, p. xi

Fig. 76, *Kāmakalā-yantra* (*viṣvayoni cakra*) based on an image from the *Sadānamāla*

According to Rao, '*Kāma* is the union of Śiva (*Kamesvara*) and Śakti (*Kamesvari*) and the *kalā* is the concrete manifestation thereof.'[66] Referring to the text of *Kāmakalā-vilasa*, Khanna describes two seeds, one white representing Śiva and one red representing Śakti. The third seed represents their union and is usually depicted as half red, half white (as seen in fig. 76). Khanna states,

> The playful dynamics of the two pulsations (red and white) of the supreme point (*mahābindu*) and emission in the transphenomenal moment of immanence is *kāmakalā*. …The atomic *kāmakalā* encapsulates the very nature of the Absolute-reality as dynamic equilibrium of opposites.[67]

66 Ramachadra Rao, *Sri Cakra*, *Its Yantra, Mantra and Tantra,* Sri Satguru Publications, 2011 (1982), p. 99

67 Khanna, 1986, p. 122

This equilibrium is seen in the dot of mixed colour. Rao describes this emanation:

> When the *bindu* and *nada* [vibration] unite a compound *bindu* emerges, bearing pure affinity to the male Śiva as well as the female Śakti. …But it has two inseparable ingredients: a white drop representing the male factor and a red drop representing the female energy, together constituting the details of productive energy. Emanation is symbolized by the letter *ka*, and absorption by the letter *lā,* the two being involved invariably in all phenomenal processes. Thus, this pair goes by the name of *Kalā*.'[68]

The gold point at the centre of the image represents what Khanna describes as the mirror of Śiva. Referring to the text of the *Kāmakalā-vilasa*, she describes,

> When the mass of sunrays of supreme *Śiva* is reflected back [on his body] from the spotless mirror of his cognitive energy, then the supreme point appears on the surface of consciousness lit by the reflected light.'[69] She continues, 'The *Māhabindu* spontaneously arises as a flash of light and rests in the centre of the *śrīcakra*.' The limitless contracts into a 'dimensionless point'.

Reading these texts brought added clarity to the painting which represents the movement through the inner triangle into the space beyond. The painting is sparse. Its central triangle meets the white space of the void, while the process of manifestation is seen through the emanation into 33 golden seeds, which move into the phenomenal world through the 33 petals, finally transforming into the 33 white seeds, and bringing us back to a circle of blackness. The use of black and white within the image provides a feeling of cosmic expansion, representing two aspects of formlessness, which are further explored in the following work. The ideas articulated in the text of the *Kāmakalā-vilasa* informed the next stage of the research. It seemed inevitable that this would be to follow this process of reabsorption into the inner triangle (*mūlatrikona*), the central point (*mahābindu*), and through what might be described as the gate between form and formlessness into the subtle dimensions of the *bindu* (*kāmakalā*) and the reflected light of the no-form, no-attributes aspect of Śiva.

Reflections

The exploration of *yantra* provided an understanding of the intimate connection between image and ritual. The process of making the *yantra* became its own ritual, and an exercise in spatial awareness, focusing the mind and body in an alignment to the physicality of horizontal/

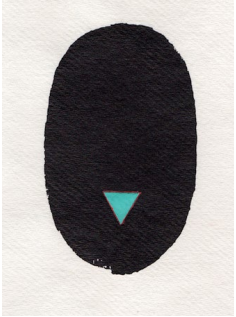
68 Ramachadra Rao, 2011 (1982), p. 98

69 Khanna, 1986, p. 118-119 (quoting from *Kāmakalā-Vilasa*, vs. 4)

vertical, N/S-E/W directionality. The progress of making reflected temple circumnavigation towards a central point. It drew attention to the precision of the geometrical construction, and the vibrancy of the hand-drawn line, perfections and imperfections. Above all, the making of *yantra* allowed an understanding of what they are; not what they represent but an experience of their actuality, their ontology.

Chapter 5

Tantric abstractions and the potential of the void



This state of neither "nonbeing nor being" or simultaneously "nonbeing and being" is not within the range of thought. …In its precosmic, preconscious totality, everything is contained, including consciousness and nothingness.

Stella Kramrisch

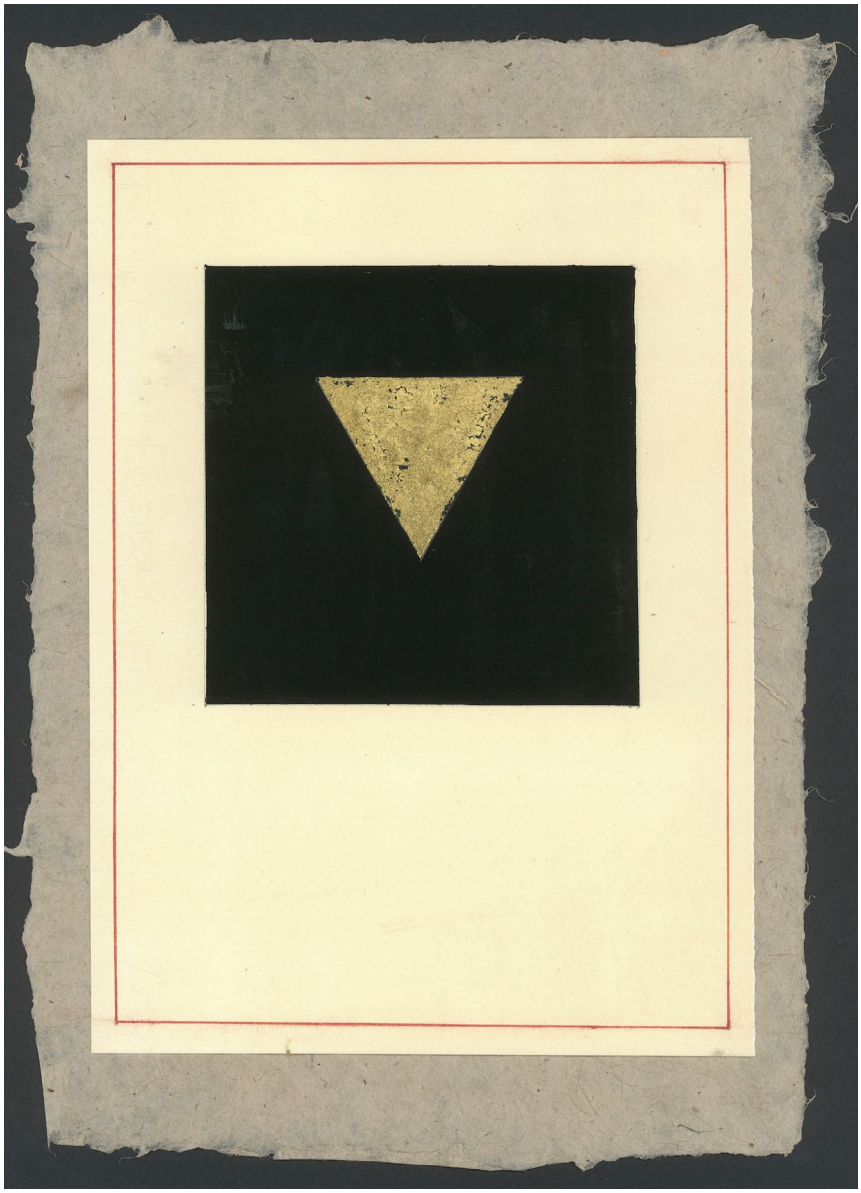


Fig. 77, *Mūlatrikoṇa*
Carbon black pigment square with gold leaf root triangle on *vasli* paper

5. 1 *Introduction*

The traditional images studied in this section are strange, difficult to define, difficult to name. I will call them 'small tantric abstractions'. While the *yantra* are complex and contain endless possibilities of interpretation, symbolism and ritual usage, these simple enigmatic paintings almost defy description, and very little has been written about them. Franck Jamme collected these small paintings over several decades and many trips to Rajasthan, and observes that they are objects used for personal meditation.[1] He says of his collections:

> These representations first appeared during the 17th century in hand-written tantric treatises, *tantras*. But they were also copied independently of the texts, on single pages and became pure autonomous supports for meditation amongst families, groups practicing tantric ritual or in the knapsacks of those who renounce the world.[2]

The beauty and charm of these simple images seems to come from a blend of their geometric simplicity and the use of old recycled paper, which often contains a shadow of some previous use. As Lawrence Rinder states:

> It's not just a desire for the antique or a nostalgic patina that makes the incidental marks so important, it's precisely that ideal forms – forms plumbed from the depths of the mind, of the soul – need to co-exist with randomness and the emptiness of chance.[3]

This combination of ideal forms and randomness emerged as a key element of consideration in working with this imagery.

5. 2 *Liṅga: the formless*

I began by making a series of small paintings based on the black ovoid which represents the formless nature of Śiva, the *liṅga* – simple, stark and potent; the un-manifest, Śiva as potential. I referenced the imagery of Jamme's *Tantra Song,*[4] and the collections of van den Bergh, while reading the various descriptions of the *liṅga* within the literature. I was aware that I could not attain the extraordinary quality of the originals, with their 'incidental marks' and time induced 'patina', but it was important that I explore the image by engaging physically in its making, exploring Rinder's 'randomness and the emptiness of chance'. Whereas the construction and

1 Jamme, 2011, p. 14

2 Franck André Jamme, *Tantra*, Paris, Galerie du Jour, 1995

3 Lawrence Rinder, in Jamme, 2011, p. 8

4 Franck André Jamme, *Tantra Song,* Los Angeles, Siglio, 2011

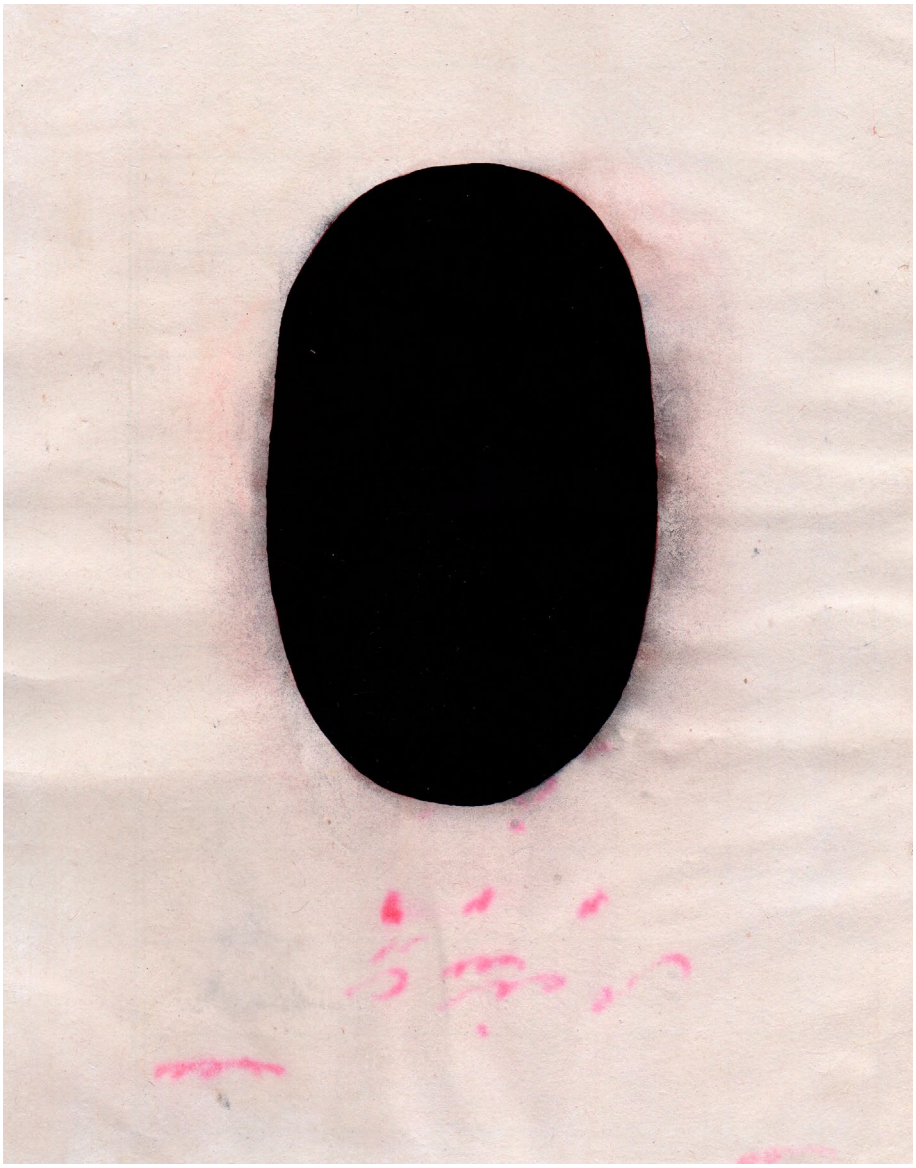


Fig. 78, *Śivaliṅga*
carbon pigment in gum arabic with an undercoating
of cinnabar on antique *vasli* paper

painting of the *yantra* required the same adherence to tradition as the *pratimā* image, working with these simple abstractions was of a different order and required a completely different approach. The first image (fig. 78) was made on once-used, pasted layers of *vasli* paper, employing the processes I had learnt in making Indian miniatures. I painted the ovoid with cinnabar, then added layers of carbon black; obscuring, but not completely obliterating. The image is simple but powerful, and its intensity continues to grow as I live closely with it.

I wanted to explore different ways of creating this black ovoid, and made a stencil, quickly producing a series of ovals with Chinese ink (a carbon/soot black) on white cotton paper. Their simplicity seemed to demand repetition; I worked quickly and very soon became absorbed

in the slight anomalies between similar images. The images were all essentially the same, but each quite individual, as the brush met the paper in slightly different ways. The bleed under the stencil formed by the rough surface of the hand-made, un-pressed paper differed in each image. The edge was vibrant, and gave each its individual quality. Here again the "imperfection", the slight roughness of the edge of the shape, adds a dynamism which would not be found in a more perfect figure. The more perfect shape seems to be static, lacking vitality and maybe more importantly, lacking a kind of potential – the potential of movement and vibration, as if the image is about to move and change into something else (figs. 79-81).

The more I worked and lived with the images, It became apparent that their effect is part retinal, an after-image setting up a kind of resonance and vibration. They play with perception, evoke different sensations. They seemed to reflect the effects of perception that can occur during meditation practice. Was this why the imagery felt so familiar? Are they in fact projections of some kind of neural activity that may take place during the process of inner concentration? I was reminded of Rinder's observation that they are 'tool-like and, in some spiritual way, pragmatic'.[5]

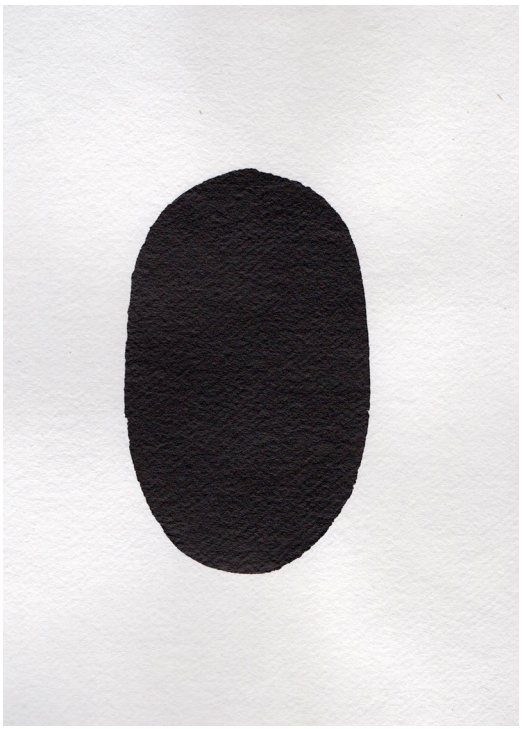
In the tantric yoga tradition, it is common to use a visual aid, and certain yoga and meditation instructions provide simple geometric shapes to use as a focus when concentrating on specific *cakras*.[6] The practice of contemplating the image, with the eyes slightly unfocused, encourages the appearance of an after-image which seems cause the shape to pulsate. This effect is produced through the use of complementary colours. For example, the figure for the base *cakra* is a yellow square, the image for concentration a purple square. After concentration on the purple square, a yellow after-image emerges.[7] The figure related to the *viśūddha* cakra (throat center) is a black ovoid, representing the formless *akaśa* (space, ether), and the diagram for concentration is a white ovoid on a black background. After contemplating this image for some minutes, the black ovoid after-image appears. This practice is discussed by Mumford.[8] A similar sensation occurred while painting these small abstractions, an experience which was distinctly different from the contemplative, repetitive, concentrated activity of painting the *yantra*. It is interesting to observe that the shape would sometimes appear as a hole, a black hole of great depth, sometimes a solid shape of dark matter which danced on the page. Working with the black ovoid of Śiva as *liṅga* or

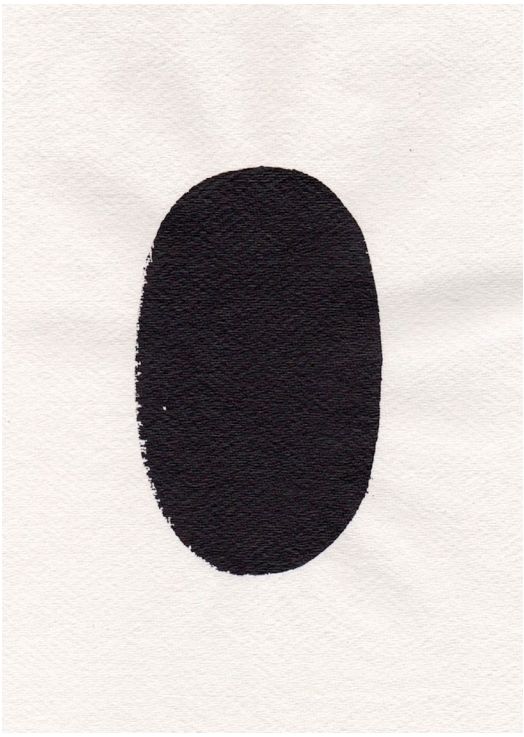
5 Jamme, 2011, p. 8

6 See, for example, Jonn Mumford, *A Chakra and Kundalini Workbook*, Llewellyn Publications, St Paul, 2001. Mumford is an initiate into the Satyananda Saraswati tradition at the Bihar School of Yoga. Eliade also discusses the colours, geometric shapes, *yantra* associated with the *cakras,* Eliade, 2009 (1953), p. 241-242

7 Eg. The base *cakra* is considered to have a yellow square as its basis, and the image used for concentration is a blue-purple square, Mumford, 2001, p. 113; Eliade, 2009, p. 241; Woodroffe, 1928, p. 111-114

8 Mumford, 2001, p. 113 The *viśūddha* (throat) cakra is also related to Śiva's purification of poisons, and the reason that he is often represented with a blue throat, as in fig.56.





Figs. 79-81, *Śivaliṅga*

in non-manifest form, the dark ovoid floats in space, often with a vague halo of another colour creating a vibratory after-image effect, which causes the image to shimmer with intensity.

The experience echoed lines of the *Liṅga Purāṅa*: 'He was white, black, pure … soul of all and identical with Being and non-Being.'[9] This indefinable space between being and non-being, existence and non-existence, form and no form is captured by Stella Kramrisch in *The Presence of Siva*:

> It is then that the first indefinable wholeness of the total absence or the total presence of both nonbeing and being appears to recede and to set up the screen on which are seen the large figures of gods and their actions. This state of neither "nonbeing nor being" or simultaneously "nonbeing and being" is not within the range of thought. It is a plenum that defies definition, for it has no limits. Yet it is not a chaos, the darkness covered by darkness, said to have existed before the beginning of the created universe (R.V. 10. 129.3). In its precosmic, preconscious totality, everything is contained, including consciousness and nothingness.[10]

Similarly, in the *Śiva Purāṅa:* 'The unmanifest is called the *liṅga*. It is the source of attributes as well as that wherein the universe merges and dissolves. It has neither beginning nor end. It is the material cause of the universe.'[11] And in Mookerjee:

> Śiva stands for *asabda-brahman*, the unqualified one (without sound, without attributes, unmanifest). *Liṅga*, according to *Skanda Purāṅa*, is the name for space in which the whole universe is in the process of formation and dissolution. Śiva *liṅga*, the all-pervading space, thus symbolises a cosmic form, serenely detached and self-sufficient.[12]

Continuing to explore this darkness of the unformed, neither being nor non-being, I made a second stencil, and produced a series of simple black squares on textured cotton paper. I was fascinated by an image in Jamme's collection of a black square with a hardly visible black downward facing triangle, an echo of the *mūlatrikoṇa* (root triangle). It illustrates the extreme subtlety of these seemingly simple images, and I experimented with different media in an attempt to capture the black on black. In fig. 83, the initial square is made with black Chinese ink on white cotton paper, which produced a slight surface shine; the *mūlatrikoṇa* was painted in carbon black, pure pigment bound in gum arabica, which was flat and matt. I find this image to be one of the most important that I have produced, closest to the being-nonbeing, form-formlessness

9 *Liṅga Purāna*, *On the Origin of the Liṅga*, verse 13, p. 59

10 Kramrisch, 1981, p. 20 (R.V. relates to verses of the Ṛg Veda)

11 J. L. Shastri, *Śiva Purāṇa*, chapter 3, section 7.2, verse 7; in answer to Śri Krṣṇa's query about the nature of the *liṅga*.

12 Ajit Mookerjie, 1983, p.26-27

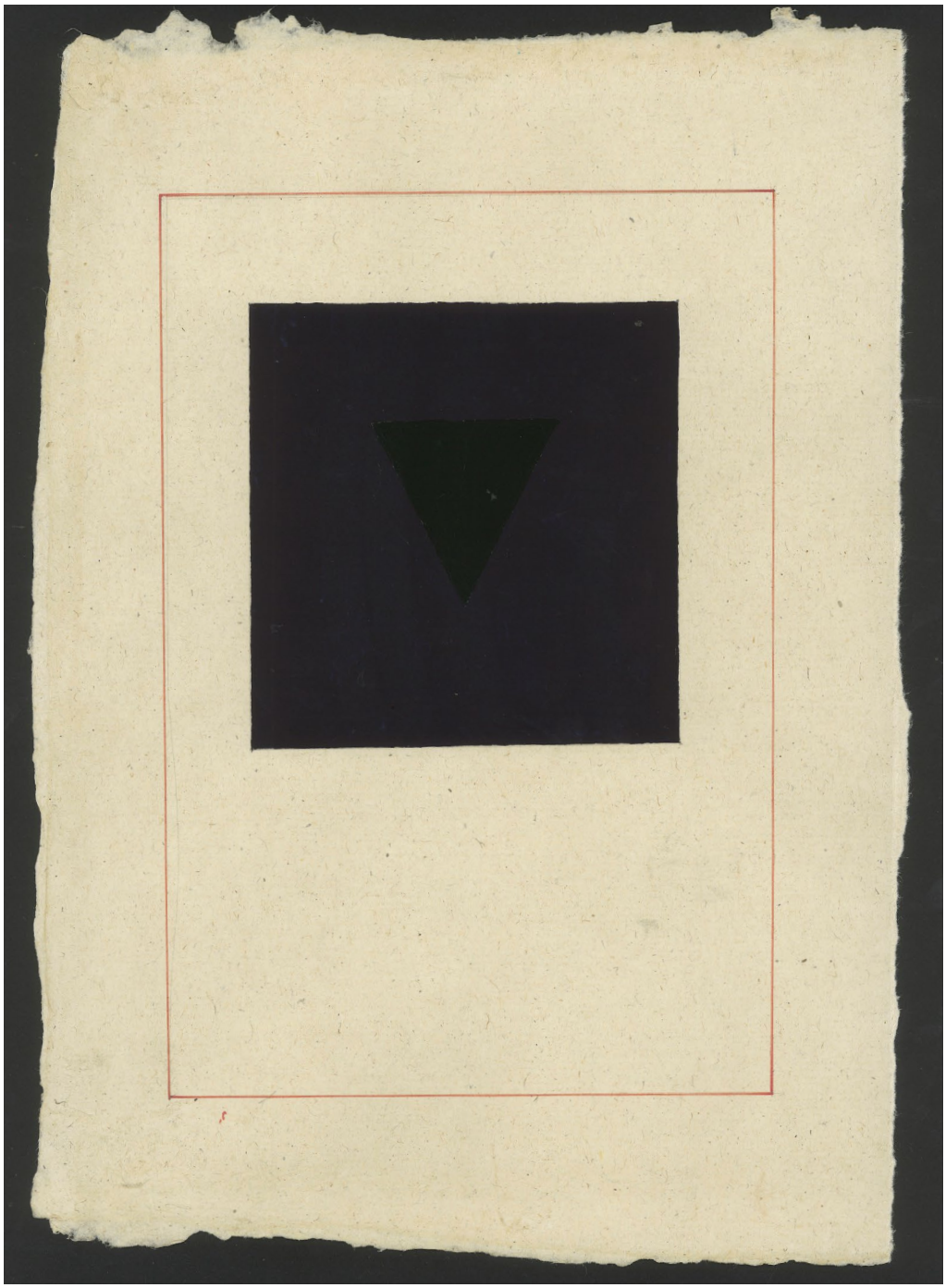


Fig. 82, *Mūlatrikoṇa*
Carbon black pigment square with indigo *mūlatrikoṇa* on handmade *vasli* paper

which demands a cessation of thought and interpretation. In a second painting, I worked on *vasli* paper with a black square and an indigo triangle (fig. 82). In both cases, I found that the subtlety has the effect of drawing the viewer into the blackness, and I was reminded of the effect of standing in front of an Ad Reinhardt painting – absorbed by the subtle and gradual emergence of a simple geometry within the initial impression of an overall blackness.

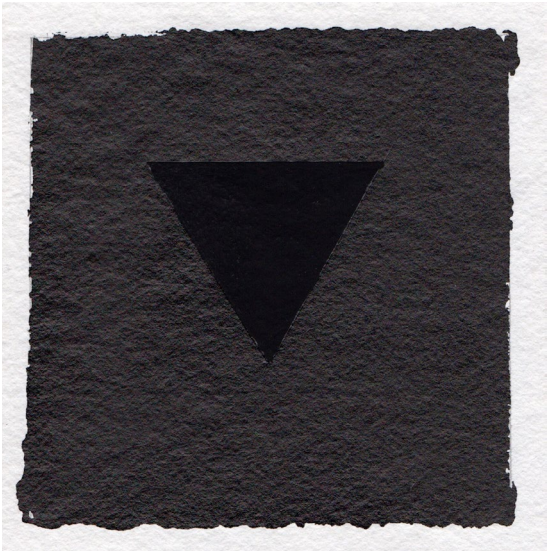


Fig. 83 *mūlatrikoṇa,*
Chinese ink and carbon black pigment in gum arabica on handmade paper

Fig. 84 *mūlatrikoṇa,*
Chinese ink and gold leaf on handmade cotton paper

Fig. 85 *mūlatrikoṇa,*
Chinese ink, *sindur* and gold leaf on handmade cotton rag paper

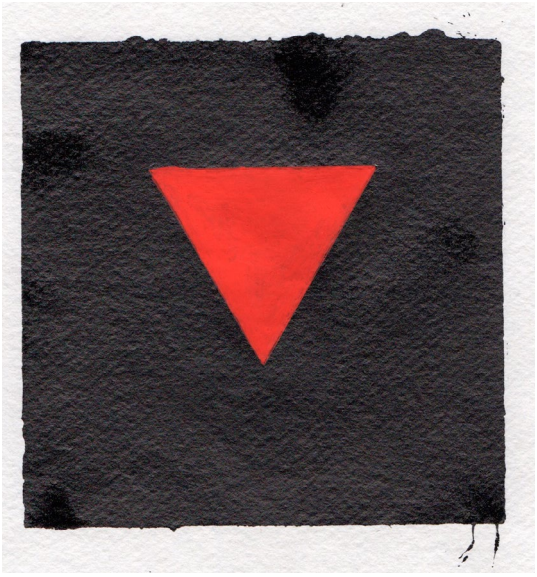


Fig. 86 *mūlatrikoṇa,*
Chinese ink, *sindur* on handmade cotton rag paper

5. 3 *Mūlatrikoṇa, māhabindu*

It was while working on these black ovoids, and reading Khanna's thesis that the two aspects of this study merged into one. I was literally moving through the centre of *śrīcakra*, through the root triangle and the *mahābindu* to contemplate what was beyond. Passing from form to no-form. It was here that I understood this approach to the formless that I was taking through the making of images. In this part of the study I finally linked the formlessness of the *liṅga* with the manifestation through the *mahābindu* and *mūlatrikona.* Khanna's study of the *śrīyantra,* and

Fig. 87, *Śrī-yantra*
Chinese ink and *sindur* on handmade cotton rag paper

commentary on the *Kāmakalā-vilāsa,* was helpful in understanding these concepts and informed the study as it progressed through these simple tantric abstractions, and to the Absolute as Śiva *liṅga.* Using the black ovoid and black square as a ground, I made a series of studies which included the simple circle, dot, *bindu*, and the *mūlatrikoṇa*, which can also be described as the *yoni* which holds the *liṅga*. The beginning of an emergence from the blackness, or the final flash of light before dissolution.

Continuing the progression from black on black, I worked with a gold root triangle, in various manifestations of wholeness; the sometimes-random adherence of the gold leaf on the uneven surface of the handmade cotton paper providing an interesting texture suggesting something coming in to form, or possibly dissolving (fig. 92). Most of the pieces were made quickly and I worked on several at one time. I played with a sequence of squares and ovoids, with *mūlatrikoṇa* and *bindu*, experimenting with different materials, while keeping close to the traditional imagery (figs 83-92). The red-lead (*sindur*) triangle (fig 86) was shocking in its vibrancy. The strength of the pigment painted over the Chinese ink of the square allowed the triangle to float over the surface. The same pigment was used for the *śrīyantra* web of interconnected triangles in fig 87.

Mahābindu is variously described as 'a drop', or the point between the subtle un-manifest pure consciousness and its manifestation. Madhu Khanna suggests that this is a 'transit point

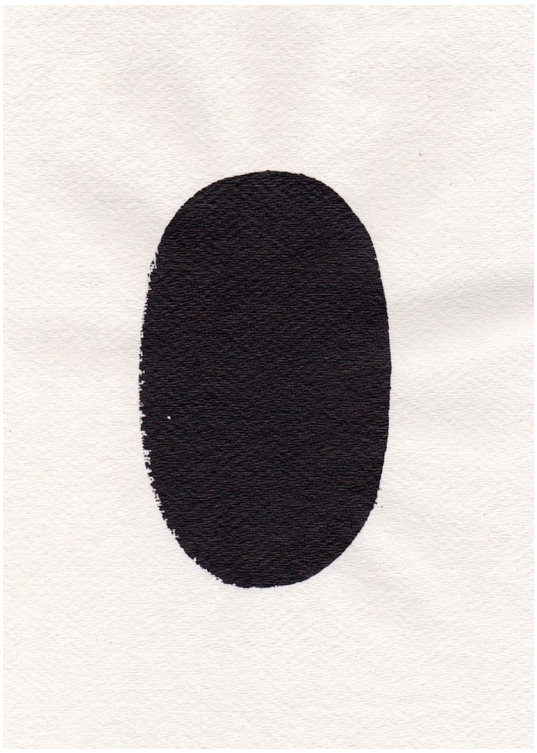


Fig. 88, Śiva *liṅga*:
Chinese ink on cotton rag paper

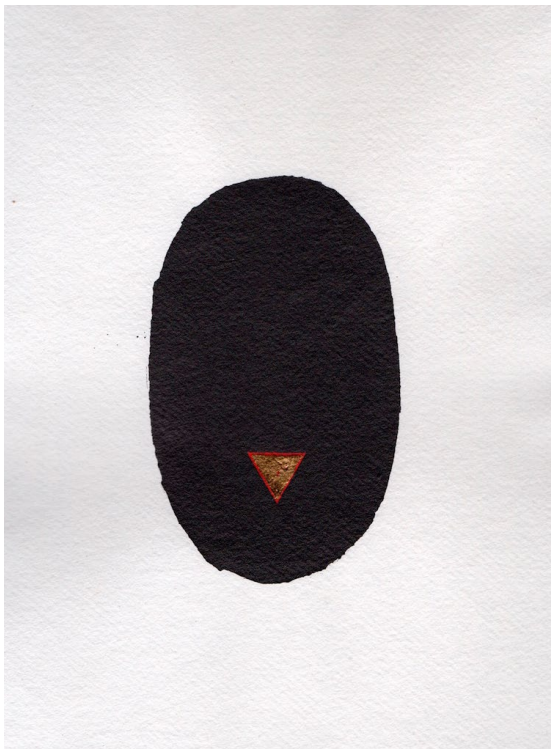


Fig. 89, Śiva *liṅga*: Chinese ink, with cinnabar pigment and gold leaf

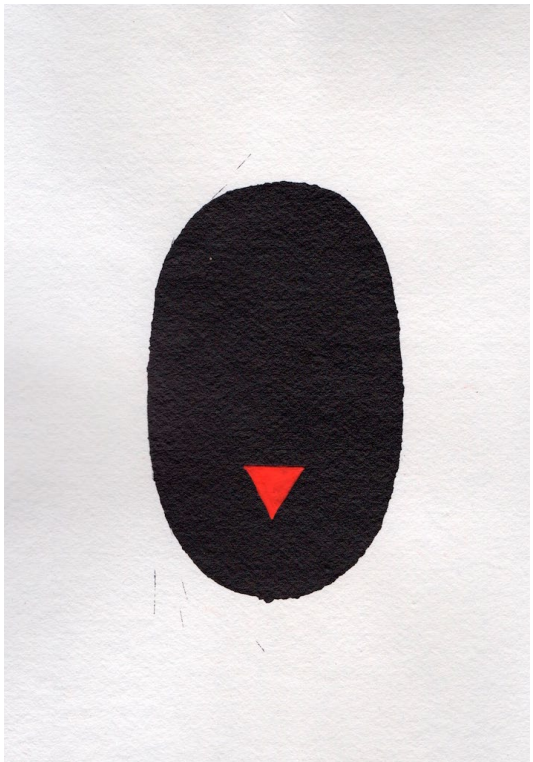


Fig. 90, Śiva *liṅga and mūlatrikoṇa*:
Chinese ink with *sindur* pigment

Fig. 91, Śiva *liṅga with bindu*
Chinese ink with gold leaf

Fig. 92, *Mūlatrikoṇa*
Chinese ink and *gold leaf* on handmade cotton rag paper

where understanding and knowledge functions as a mirror of revelation rather than a veil of concealment'.[13] It is the point of form/no-form, described in *Kāmakalā-vilāsa* as being caused by the reflection of the light of Śiva-consciousness in the 'Pure Mirror of Mahā-Śakti'.

> Within the *kāma-kalā* triangle is the dot – *bindu* – from which the world emanates.…(The *bindu* is also a drop of light), which is reflected in ever widening circles as the central triangle unfolds into the *śrīyantra*.[14]

The vibrant deep purple circle with a small gold/bronze *bindu* at the centre (fig. 93), has an interesting depth, not quite black, but a simple mixture of carbon black and cinnabar. Moving away from pure black, away from the ovoid to the circle, I felt that I was coming closer to form than formlessness. But its center, Jamme suggests, is 'a drop of extraordinarily concentrated energy, containing, in the words of André Padoux, "the undifferentiated absolute"'.[15] Or maybe Khanna's 'mirror of reflection.' It is an image which demands attention, and I can sit with it for extended periods of time, finding yet more depth and interest. Jamme comments, 'In working

13 Khanna, 1986, p. 105

14 *Punyānandanatha*, trans. Avalon, 1922, p. 11 'Upon the mass of rays of the sun, Para-Śiva, being reflected in the pure *vimarśa* mirror, the *mahābindu* appears on the *citta*-wall illuminated by the reflected rays.

15 Jamme, 2011, p. 8

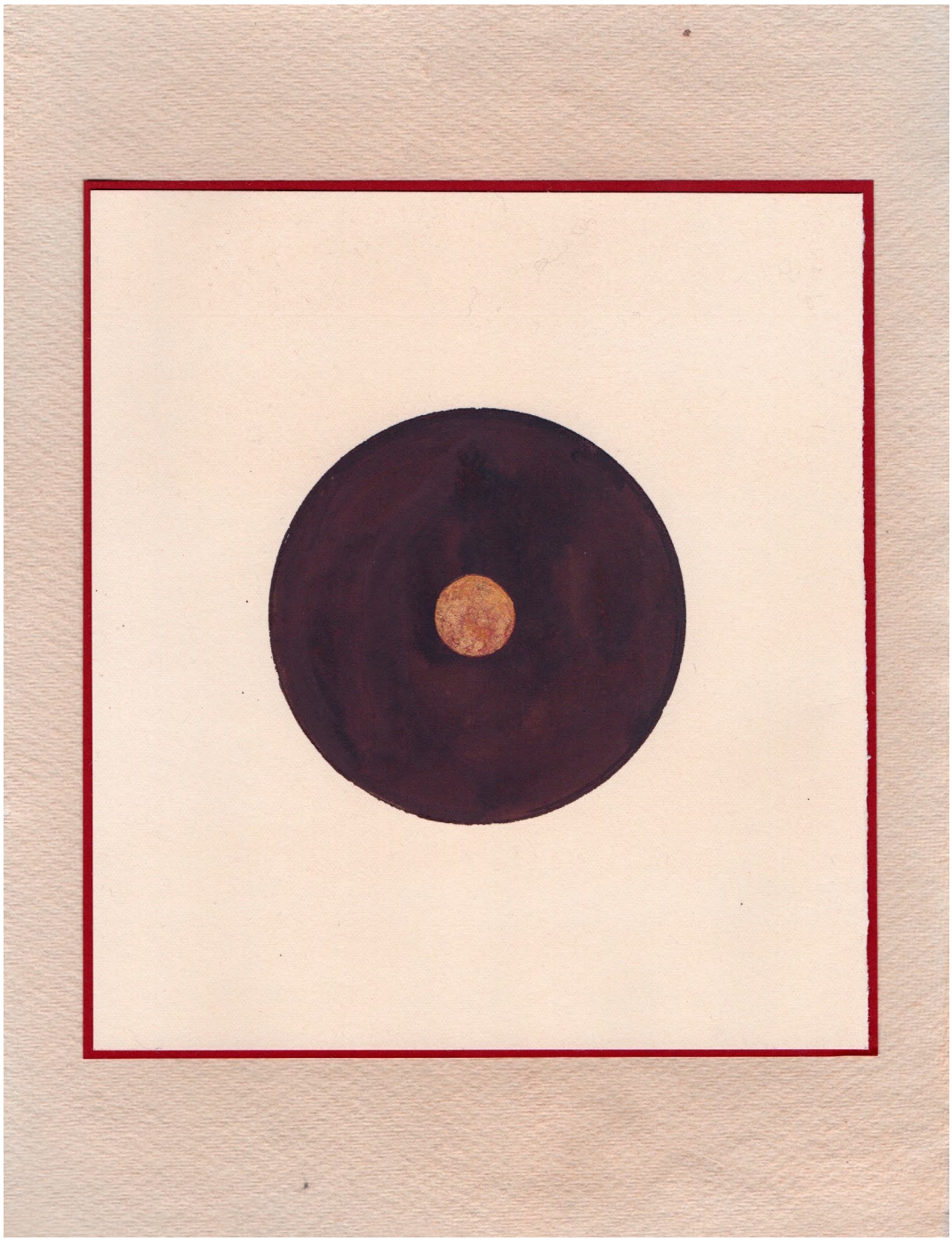


Fig 93, Author's version of anonymous small tantric abstraction,
cinnabar, carbon black pigment in gum arabica with copper leaf on *vasli* paper
From Franck André Jamme's *Tantra Song*

with this image, the adept will come to "see" the world – as it is and in its entirety.'[16] More than any other, this small painting reflects the imagery which can appear in front of closed eyes during meditation, possibly some kind of retinal effect which occurs when there is an inward concentration on the space between the eyebrows.

16 Jamme, 2011, p. 89

Unlike the *prātima* or the *yantra* the aim here was not to make a perfect reproduction, or to understand a particular geometry. It was rather to produce an image which evoked a similar experience. When discussing the reproduction by hand of these small tantric images, Jamme comments:

> Some glibly use the term 'copies'. I prefer 'interpretations' or better still, since after all, we are speaking about India, *ragas*. Even if the structure, the rules, of each of these images is similar one to the other, their lines, colouring and dimensions differ subtly according to the state of calm, concentration and delight that guided the hand on that particular day.[17]

I liked Jamme's use of 'interpretations'. While I began by closely referencing the simplest of the imagery, I soon allowed my curiosity to define colour and materials, while keeping close to the idea of an image which produces a perceptual rather than an illustrative experience. Working with these small tantric abstractions, there was little I was able to do in the way of academic research and I received no instruction. I made my own way into the imagery and the research was experimental and experiential. I was interested in how the images performed, what effect did they have, what happened to the images as I worked with them. In what way did they change and in what way did they change me?

This part of the work culminated in a small painting made on wooden gesso-board. I had no clear idea in my mind when I began, apart from the blackness of the background, and possibly one single gold triangle. I wanted to experiment with gold leaf on the carbon black surface, to see whether it would adhere, and whether it would retain its vibrancy. Happy with the result, I lived with the image for a week or so, but it was demanding more. It wasn't finished. With a golden ratio placement in mind, I made another smaller triangle, which hovered above the first, and was painted in Varanasi *sindur*. I lived with the image for a few more weeks, imagining I might add more. But apart from outlining the red clay frame in a thin earth green line, often used in icon painting, the image was finished. I loved its simplicity – the tension between the two elements.

I find it hard to talk about the images in this section. They are indescribable, and need to be experienced, not explained. Mookerjee's descriptions are minimal and vague, and while Jamme makes no attempt to classify or identify, his poetry comes closest to evoking their presence. I can only describe my experience of working with them. Gregory Bateson describes the image as working between the conscious and unconscious mind.[18] But the conscious mind wants to jump in, take over, to move into language, to name and pin down rather than allowing a state

17 Jamme, 2011, p. 100

18 Gregory Bateson, 'Style, Grace and Information in Primitive Art', in Edward A. Shanken (ed.), *Systems: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, London, p. 45

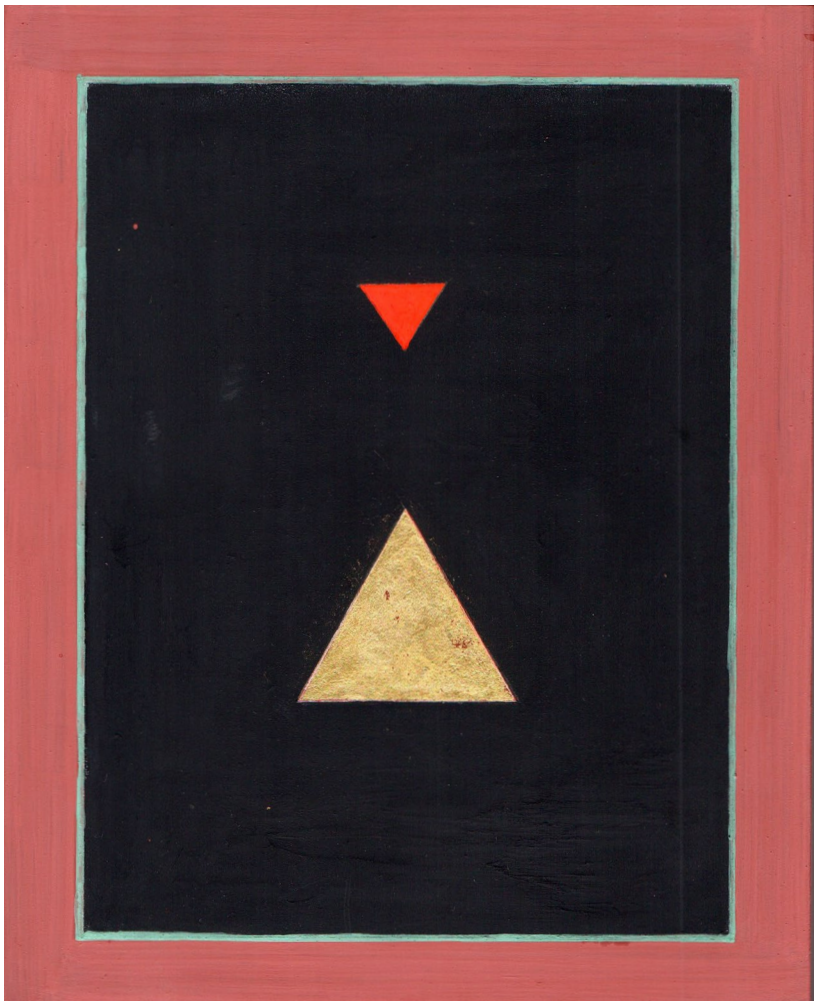


Fig. 94, Two triangles: carbon black, *sindur*, malachite pigment
in egg tempera gold leaf on gesso board

of pre-reflective awareness. Here the images themselves seem to say, 'No! Don't explain me or describe me! I am an aid to stay present and silent in that indescribable world of the infinite.'

5. 4 *Śaligrāma*

Before moving on to consider the imagery of the *hiraṇyagarbha* , I pursued the circular imagery first approached in fig. 93 by looking into the *śaligrāma*, small circular images which contain various signs and symbols of the attributes of Viṣṇu.[19] Although I now had Vyakul's study to contextualise the work, and a few examples in the publications of Mookerjee, Jamme and van den Berg, I was not sure how to approach this area of study. As with the images above, this was not an exercise of copying an original, and I had been unsure whether *śaligrāma* should from part of the research. But on my return from Rajasthan, inspired by my contact with Vyakul's

19 Jamme, 2011, p. 86-89; Mookerjee, 1975, p. 109

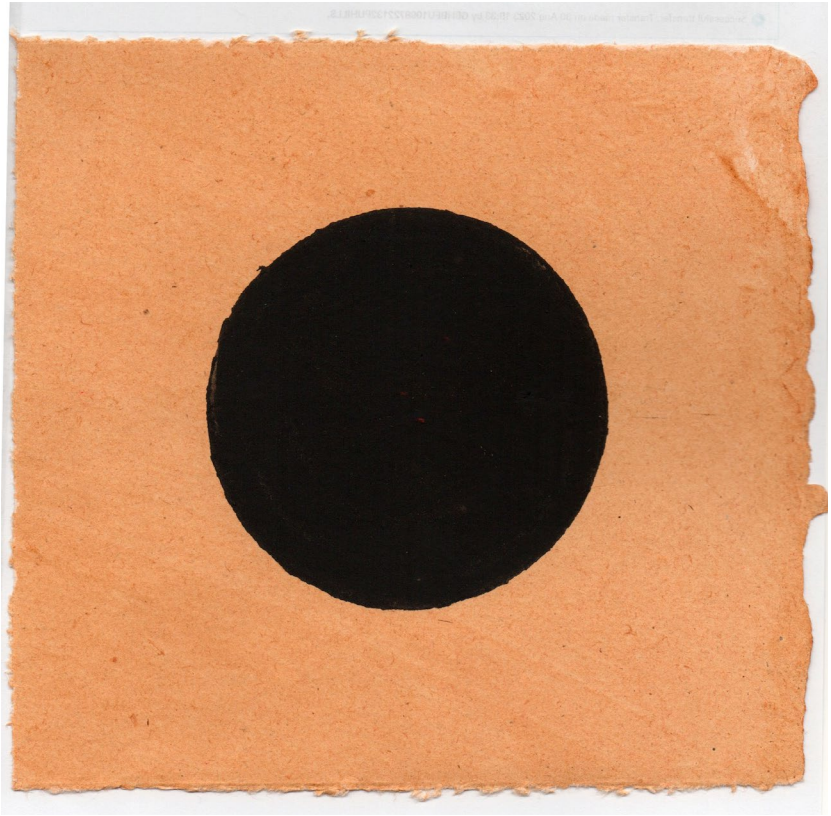


Fig. 95, *Śaligrāma* – study, carbon black on rough *vasli* paper

work, and by the materials I had sourced there, I began by producing a series of circles, using a rough *vasli* paper from Jaipur, and pigment from Jaipur and Varanasi, ground and combined with gum arabica from the Varanasi spice market. Imagery began to emerge from within the making process itself, I found that I needed to allow the materials to act, to find their own resolution.

Again, the black grounds felt complete in themselves. They possessed a presence and an ambiguity, which immediately provided interest and meaning. I was reluctant to add to their pure intensity. But here it was texture that proved to provide the same degree of presence in the more nuanced, coloured images. I needed to play with the surface, allowing the different qualities of the pigment to interact and form a kind of natural patterning, which began to suggest the original nature of these pieces, reflecting the action of water on stone. (Figs. 96, 97)

Having long been a collector of stones, from both sea and river, I have always been fascinated by the shapes formed, and how this will depend on local geology, different strata of rock with their varying rates of erosion. So here, this was not a matter of attempting to copy a pattern, or to relate to a textual source, but to allow the processes of nature to act in some way. I was reminded of John Cage's series of prints and watercolours of stones (*New River Watercolours, Stones*) made in 1988-89,

Fig. 96, Śaligrāma – study, carbon black and malachite pigment on rough vasli paper

Fig. 97, Śaligrāma – study, carbon black and malachite pigment on rough vasli paper

Fig. 98, Śaligrāma – study, carbon black, malachite, cinnabar and *sindur* pigment on rough vasli paper

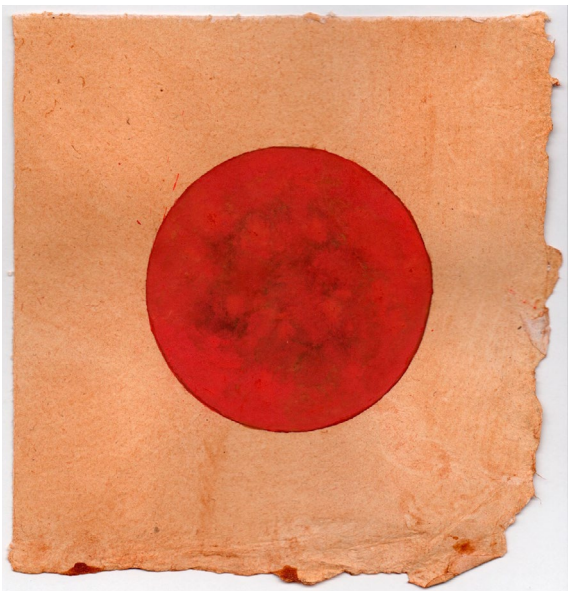
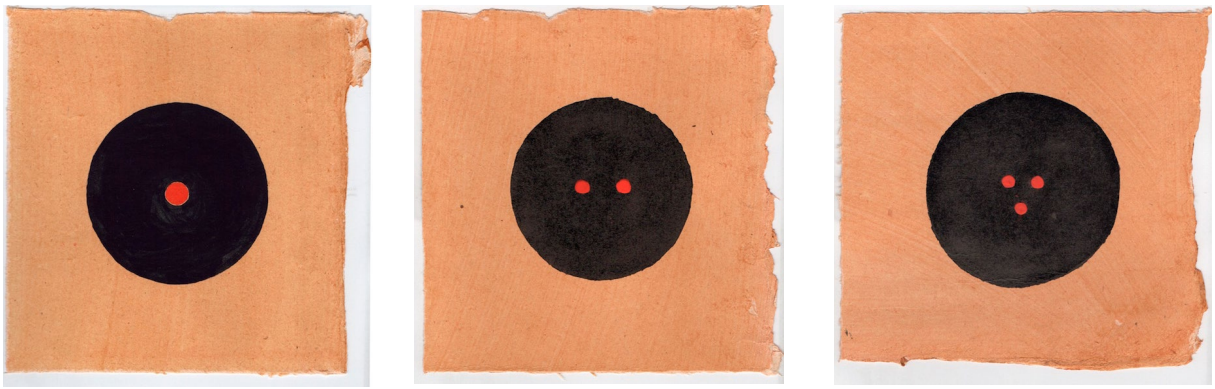


Fig. 99, Śaligrāma – study, cinnabar, *sindur* and carbon black on rough *vasli* paper

and dependent on various chance, or maybe more accurately, natural patterns of change.[20] Cage constantly refers to 'the operations of nature', he writes, 'I have for many years accepted, and I still do, the doctrine about art, occidental and oriental, set forth by Ananda K Coomaraswamy

20 John Cage: *Every Day is a Good Day: The Visual Art of John Cage*, Hayward Publishing, London, 2010



Figs. 100-103, Śaligrāma studies, carbon black and *sindur* on rough vasli paper

in his book *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, that the function of Art is to imitate nature in her manner of operation.'[21]

These small circular studies, inspired by the observation of *śaligrāma* and the paintings of Vyakul, brought me back to working very directly with the materials themselves, back to the original discoveries made through working with natural pigment and allowing the materials to act according to their innate nature; back to considering the geology of the substance and its formation within the earth, to cosmogenesis and the emergence of things. These small studies again used the simple pigments of carbon black, cinnabar (*śingraf*), red lead oxide (*sindur*), malachite (copper carbonate),[22] and attempted to allow the materials to act and react.

On my return from Rajasthan, I visited the gallery of Joost van den Bergh, a collector of Vyakul and other *śaligrāma,* and was able to examine these collections in that 'close-up and personal' way which is so essential for understanding these works. Van den Bergh also has an extraordinary collection of *śaligrāma* stones, and the paintings were made with the experience of these objects fresh in my mind. Working in this way brought me back to considering the unformed, chaos, original blackness and obscurity. Here line, colour and texture are the subject matter. There is no attempt to convey an idea or a thought. The only representation may be of the unformed chaos, the materials taken back to their primacy and allowed to interact according to their natural tendencies.

Block, Barsch and Lenz say of Vyakul's paintings:

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21 Cage, 1968, p. 31. *Ars imitatur naturum in sua operatione*: art imitates nature in its workings (Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologieo (ST), 1a 117) is the translation used by Coomaraswamy and later by Cage, 'art is the imitation of nature in her manner of operation'.

22 $Cu_2CO_3(OH)_2$. Formed through the oxidation of copper sulphide, Malachite is considered the earliest copper carbonate, and has been mined in the Middle East from at least 3000 BCE

> A thought only then becomes visible when it can be expressed in words or is visibly concretised into a line, which is no longer an arbitrary line, into a form that becomes a sign, into a colour that is not in the service of a representation, but as fabric of the composition, and becomes the subject matter and substance.[23]

5. 5 *Hiraṇyagarbha and the potential of the void*

While working with the black ovoid, and experiencing its ability to morph and change, it began to merge in my mind with the golden seed/womb, the *hiraṇyagarbha.* The egg-shaped/ovoid imagery seemed almost to act as positive/negative version of the same image. It was interesting, therefore, to read in the *Śiva Purāṇa* that, in one of many versions of the mythology that surrounds *hiraṇyagarbha,* the golden seed/egg is a manifestation of Śiva.[24] And in *The Īśvara Gītā, Lord Śiva's Song*, we read, 'The sun god Hiraṇyagarbha, witness to the entire world, impeller of the wheel of time, was also born from me.'[25]

Manaku's original painting of Hiraṇyagarbha (fig. 20) employs a fascinating and intricate patterning of spirals, swirls and eddies representing the chaos of the unformed, which Goswamy describes as 'giant rings of time on timeless waters.'[26] According to Woodroffe, this swirling cosmology represents the breath of Viṣṇu, who is known as the Lord of Time. His out-breath creates the worlds, his in-breath their dissolution. Vast expanses of time and space are represented by the coiling and uncoiling, constantly moving oceans:

> Breathing is a microcosmic manifestation of the macrocosmic rhythm to which the whole universe moves and according to which it appears and disappears. And so it is said that the life of Brahma, the Creative-consciousness in any universe, is of the duration of the out-going breath of the Lord of Time. With His in-breathing all worlds are withdrawn.[27]

The image seems to illustrate Pramathanatha Mukhopadhyay's observation that the undifferentiated void has a principle of coiling and uncoiling; a spiralling motion of differentiation and integration, or as he describes, 'A rhythmic movement of maximum veiling to maximum manifestation.'[28] The allusion to cosmological activity brought to my mind a description of string

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23 Rene Bock, Barbara Barsch, Iris Lenz, *Gedanken in Farben und Linien*, Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, Köln, 1994

24 *Śiva Purāṇa,* edited by L. P. Shastri, Wisdom Library, Delhi, 1950, verse 29

25 Andrew J. Nicholson, *Lord Śiva's Song The Īśvara Gītā,* State University of New York Press, New York, 2014, p. 89

26 Goswamy, 2016, p. 127

27 Woodroffe, 1922, p. 29

28 *Sir John Woodroffe, World as Power, Power as Life,* Ganesh & Co, Madras, 1922, pp. 80-82 (Appendix by Professor Pramathanatha Mukhopadhyay) Both Woodroffe and Mukhopadhyay drew attention to the similarities between certain textual descriptions of the unfolding cosmos and early 20th century discoveries in the realm of physics.

theory by physicist Brian Greene: 'A quantum universe with numerous hidden dimensions coiled into the fabric of the cosmos – dimensions whose lavishly entwined geometry may well hold the key to some of the most profound questions ever posed.'[29]

Manaku's 'Hiraṇyagarbha' inspired my original field trip to Varanasi, where the painting is housed in the Bharat Kala Bhavan, the museum associated with Benares Hindu University. When I first visited the museum in 2019 it was still part of the reserve collections, and I was able to examine it closely, hold it in my hands, feel the weight of the slightly embossed gold of the womb-egg, roughly painted in comparison with the delicacy of the swirling cosmos, and in stark contrast to the heavy shininess of the lacquered cinnabar of the border. It is made simply of gold, cinnabar and grey. B. N. Goswamy observes:

> A fascinating detail about this painting: when one sees the painting laid flat, the egg appears a bit dark, almost dominated by browns. It is when you hold the painting in your hand, as it was meant to be, and move it ever so slightly, that it reveals itself: the great egg begins to glisten, an ovoid form of purest gold; true *hiraṇya*, to use the Sanskrit term for the precious metal.[30]

This is an image of a very different kind. Not the 'instruction manual' of the Devi *pratimā*, with every detail prescribed in tradition, nor the subtle mapping of the *yantra*, or the stark retinal effects of the *liṅga*. Here it is as if the artist were playing with ideas, or as Goswamy suggests, 'struggling to come to terms with the subject'.[31] I tentatively began exploring ideas around the golden seed egg, but soon abandoned my initial small studies (eg. fig. 104). They were somehow unsuitable for the subject matter, which seemed to demand something bolder – more freedom in the creation of chaos.

I began to experiment with different ways of representing this swirling cosmos, and looked into marbling. I came across the Japanese technique called *suminagashi* (*sumi,* ink; *nagasu,* to float, to drift; *nagashi,* a sink, a bath), which traditionally uses Japanese/Chinese ink floated on a bath of water. The ink stick, which is made by burning and collecting the smoke from various woods and oils, is slightly greasy, but still water soluble, and the action of dropping ink onto the surface of the water requires a very delicate action, quite different to that of the more robust *ebru* techniques used in Turkish marbling. The traditional method involves the creation of increasingly intricate patterns of concentric circles, and while using this as a base, I also

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Einstein's award of the Nobel prize for physics in 1921, a year before the publication of this text, ensured that his work was very well publicized, and both were clearly familiar with advances in modern physics.

29 Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe*, Vintage, London, 2000, p. x-xi

30 B. N. Goswamy, 2016, p. 127

31 Goswamy, 2016, p. 127

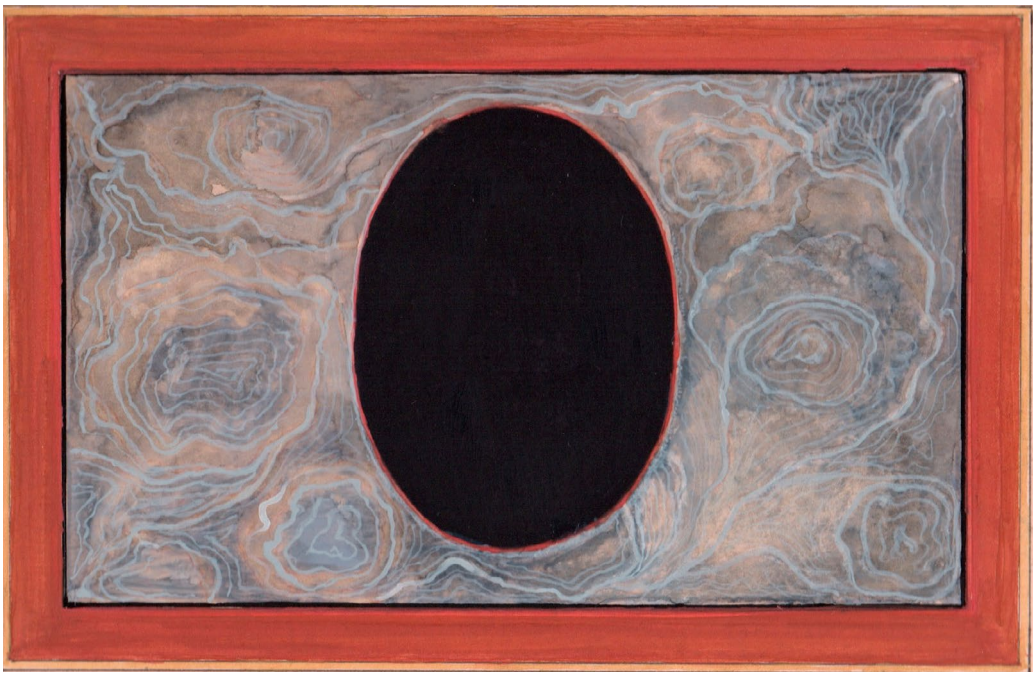


Fig. 104, Initial study based on *hiranyagarbha*

experimented with other patternings. Using various materials (lead pencil, charcoal, carbon black paint, Chinese ink), I created a series of black ovoids which sometimes seemed to float on the *suminagashi* chaos, and other times appeared as a gateway to another dimension (figs. 105-107). The images in figures 108 and 109 followed from these experimental images. These simple black ovoids were still playing with perception in interesting ways that seemed to constantly reflect the form and formless dichotomy. As I worked with the image, I found the same visual shifts as with the earlier black ovoids. Here the egg-shape became the ovoid, the ovoid became a deep black hole in cosmic space-time.

Fig. 105 Suminagashi with Chines,e ink and cinnabar

Fig.106, Suminagashi with charcoal

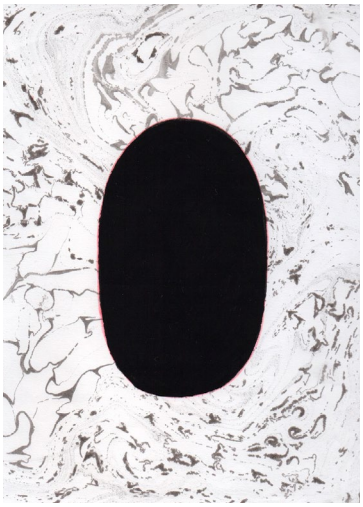


Fig. 107, Suminagashi with carbon back pigment and red pencil

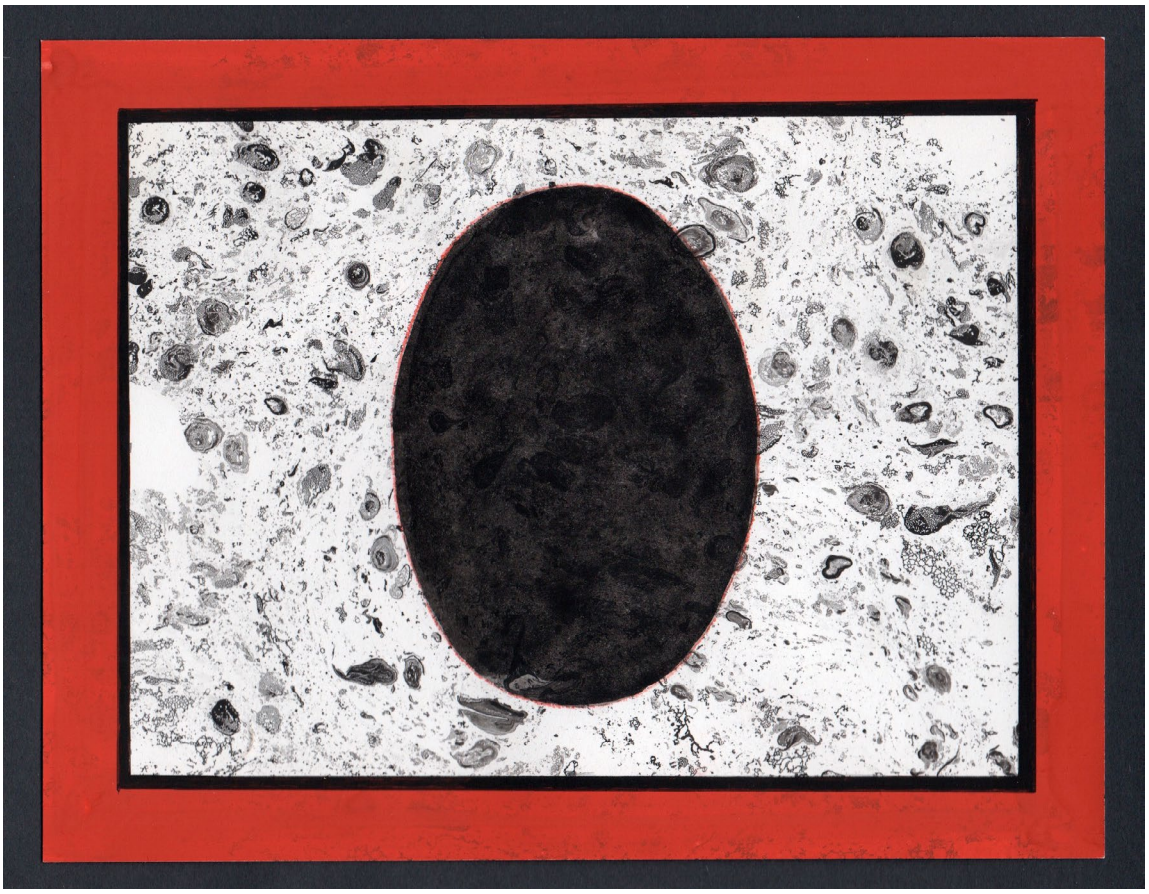


Fig. 108, Suminagashi with carbon black pigment and cinnabar

The exploration continued with a series of studies on paper, all of which began with a rectangle of pure carbon black, the primal darkness, the un-manifest as a dark unknown, unknowable. The intention was to allow an emergence, though I was not sure what form this would take. I was fascinated by the descriptions of the *hiraṇyagarbha*, such as Woodroffe's, 'The world as potentiality – womb of the Immense (*brahman*)'.[32] And Kramrisch: 'A state of wholeness that existed before the fall of the seed. This state is beyond words. It is indescribable and inaccessible to the senses. It is "neither nonbeing nor being."'[33]

Three small paintings emerged from the blackness. For the first I applied shell gold to the ovoid, the seed/egg floating in darkness (fig. 110). I had intended to create a more solid egg, but I liked the patterning that emerged in the gold as it was applied – it seemed to reflect an earlier stage of formation, the egg-womb not yet solidified, or possibly beginning to dissolve. As I worked, I began to experience the now familiar after-image sensation, and the next painting became its inversion, a negative image (fig. 111). This was a hole, a gap, a 'no-form' in the surrounding cosmos, which seemed to have drawn its gold threads from the cosmic egg, and had maybe

32 Woodroffe, 1921, p. 81

33 Kramrisch, 1981, p. 20. Seed is a possible translation of *gārbha*.

Fig. 109, Suminagashi with carbon black pigment and cinnabar

already begun its manifestation through this web-like patterning, 'As the spider spins out and draws in its threads …so does the world spring from the imperishable.'[34] It was as if the golden egg-womb had split open and given birth to Indra's Net.

While working on the image I considered the concept of veiling; each level of materialization acting as a veil which covers and obscures the formless. This is beautifully suggested in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*: 'Within the veil made of gold is *brahman* – there the sun shines not, nor the moon nor stars, nor do the lightnings strike.'[35] I spent time with the final black rectangle, trying to decide how to approach it. I worked on a frame, and considered further. But the image was intent on remaining in the realm of the primal darkness. After applying several layers of pigment and attaining an interesting matt depth to the surface, it seemed appropriate that it should remain black. It was a blackness which invited closer observation, as if the opacity of the surface was drawing one in to the center, through the final veil… the containment of the framing providing a window onto nothingness. (Fig. 112)

34 Katz and Egenes (trans), *The Upanishads*, *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*. p. 89

35 Katz and Egenes, p. 89

Fig. 110, Carbon black pigment in gum arabic, shell gold and cinnabar

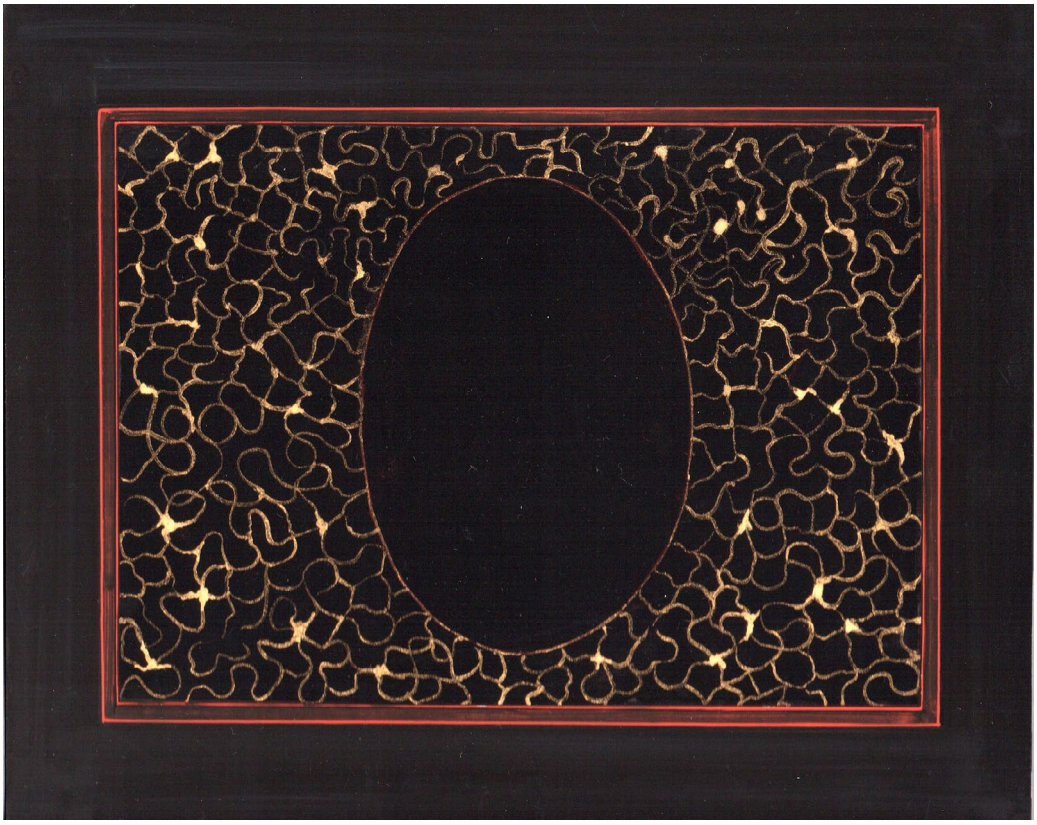


Fig. 111, Carbon black pigment in gum arabic, shell gold and cinnabar

Fig. 112, Darkness within Darkness,
carbon black pigment with cinnabar

Fig. 113, Cosmogenesis 1
carbon black, cinnabar, zinc white, shell gold

The Net of Indra describes a vast net in which the god holds the universe – potentially keeping it captive, or in a state of magical illusion. But the concept is also found in Mahayana Buddhism as a metaphor for the inter-connectedness of all things, or the underlying structure of the universe in which each detail is a reflection of the whole. 'All the different phenomena in all worlds are interrelated in Indra's net'.[36] According to Alan Watts:

> Imagine a multidimensional spider's web in the early morning covered with dew drops. And every dew drop contains the reflection of all the other dew drops. And, in each reflected dew drop, the reflections of all the other dew drops in that reflection. And so *ad infinitum*. That is the Buddhist conception of the universe in an image.[37]

In his seminal 1975 publication, *The Tao of Physics,* Fritjof Capra refers to the inter-connectedness of things, citing Indra's Net:

> Particles are dynamically composed of one another in a self-consistent way, and in that sense can be said to 'contain' one another. In Mahayana Buddhism, a very similar notion is applied to the whole universe. This cosmic network of interpenetrating things is illustrated

36 Thomas Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra*, Boston, Shambala, 1993, p. 925
37 Alan Watts, Podcast, *Following the Middle Way* #3, alanwattspodcast.com, 31 August 2008

Fig. 114, Egg tempera with carbon black pigment and shell gold on gesso wooden panel

in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* by the metaphor of Indra's net, a vast network of precious gems hanging over the palace of the god Indra.[38]

The Net of Indra and the constant movement of the emerging cosmos played in my mind against these observations of modern physics as I began a series of explorations on chalk-gessoed wooden board, using egg tempera medium, carbon black pigment and shell gold, with elements of red earth and cinnabar. Here I applied the "*roshkrish*" technique that I had previously used while working with traditional icon painting, where it is used to create what is referred to as the 'chaos level', the primordial chaos from which divine order will arise.[39] In fig. 114, the gritty materiality of the carbon formed its own patterning, and although my original intention was to build up layers of shell gold to form a solid gold seed/egg, I became absorbed by the interplay of carbon and gold, and again saw this as the beginning of a series on emergence. This was an emergence through patterning, and related to the inherent properties of the materials themselves – essentially two randomly chaotic interference patterns. The image seen in fig. 115 has the quality of a dark womb, a dark matrix, floating in a constantly moving fiery chaos.

38 Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, Fontana, London, 1975, p. 313

39 As discussed in Chapter 2.

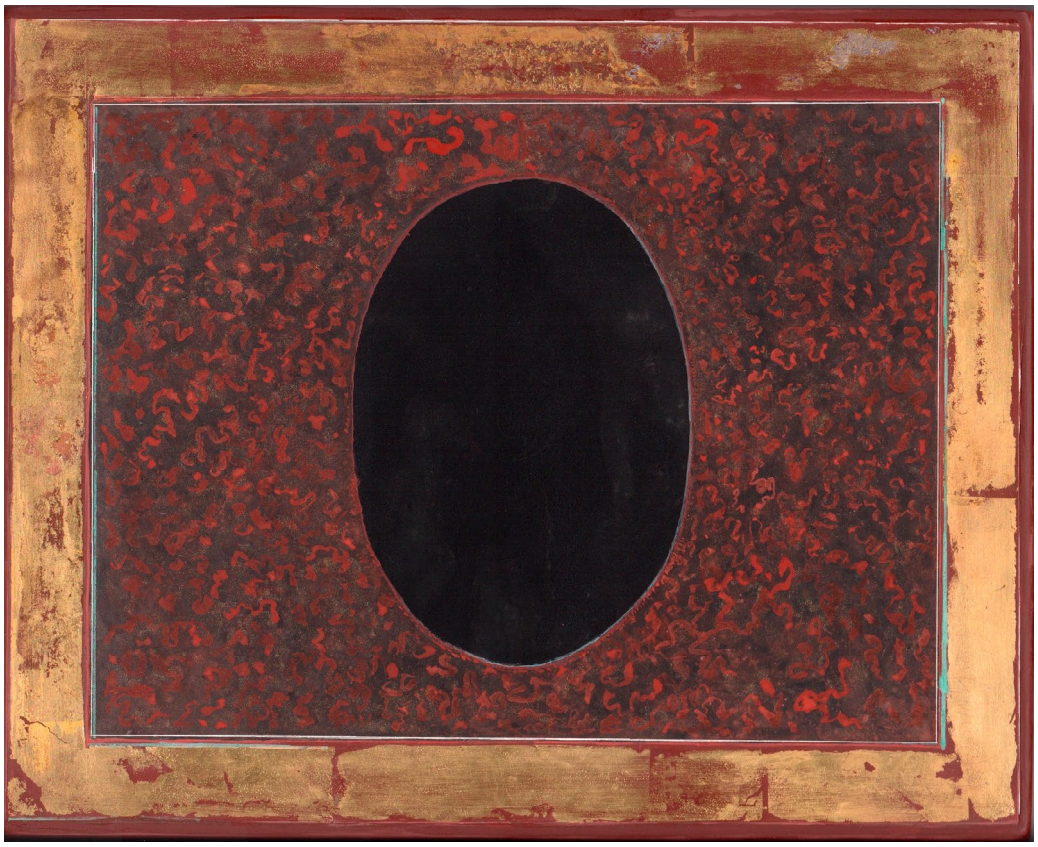


Fig. 115, Egg tempera with carbon black, cinnabar, sindur and malachite pigment with gold leaf frame on gesso wooden panel

Woodroffe suggests that, 'the Hindus call the world "*jagat*, the moving thing". Nothing is inert.'[40] He later expresses this idea of motion and the latent energy within the void:

> Consciousness is immanent (however veiled) in mind and matter. The universe is mind and matter in constant motion (*spanda*), not a single particle being for one moment at rest. …This and its modes are in perpetual movement. For activity is the essential characteristic of the ultimate 'substance/energy'.[41]

5. 6 *Primal landscapes*

In the series of paintings on paper discussed above, one fourth black rectangle was waiting for completion. I wanted to move forward from this egg-shaped emergence and web-like patterning into the primal separation of elements. I began with a lightning strike, which possibly brings the earth into formation, the red earth pigment forming the classical horizon-curve of the Indian miniature, the grey beneath a suggestion of emerging waters (fig. 113).

40 Woodroffe, 1922, p. 4

41 Woodroffe, 1921, p. 55

Fig. 116, The beginning of things 1;
gouache on watercolour paper

This was carried forward with two more studies which followed with an accumulation of cloud-vapours and the movement of the waters over the earth. I used the proportions common to Mewari landscapes, with curved horizon line and stylized water patterning.

These 'primal landscapes' were taken forward into a series which I called *Icons of Abstraction.* The paintings (figs. 118-122) were made on wood with gesso base and a palate limited to carbon black, red earth and gold – with occasional fragments of copper. While holding in mind the concept of emergence from the formless, I continued the exploration into the behaviour of materials. The initial image maintained a golden-section-based structure, and similarly drew on elements of Indian miniature painting, with the curved horizon, and simple elemental delineation of water, earth and air. I quickly laid down three areas – red earth, mixed with

Fig. 117, The beginning of things 2;
gouahe on watercolour paper

grit to make a kind of earth-chaos; black carbon to suggest dark waters; small discarded pieces of gold leaf intermixed with elements of copper, to retain a fluid, not-completely-formed, but reflective light (fig. 118). I had originally envisaged a series of developing landscapes, but what emerged was a series of simplifications, a stripping away to the final, essentially black void. The process unfolded naturally and unexpectedly: the demands, it seemed, of the materials, the process, the proportion of the board. Playing with both formal and formless patterning, the elements gradually reduced themselves to blackness (figs. 119-122). As I painted the series, each subsequent image was simplified – an emergent approach towards the formless. But once completed, the series could also be read as an emergence from darkness, the lightning strike of time/consciousness which begins the separation/emergence into form. The series can be read in both ways – the stirrings of life but also its return.

Fig. 118, Icons of Abstraction - Initial phase
egg tempera with carbon black, red earth pigment,
gold leaf, copper leaf, on gesso board

While remaining simple and abstract, the images retained the intimacy of a miniature, made in part by the framing, which is intrinsic to much traditional art. I was reminded of Robert Irwin's short dalliance with small objects of which he said, 'The effect was one of calm, of intimacy, of meditation. And the fact that you were meant to hold them meant that they could only be experienced privately, intimately.'[42] I liked the idea of privacy. Objects that could be held. But painted on wood they also had solidity. These objects seemed to act as small shrines, objects for contemplation; a focus of awareness gradually approaching the Absolute.

42 Weschler, 2008, p. 61-62

Fig. 119, Icons of Abstraction 2
egg tempera with carbon black, red earth pigment, gold leaf, on gesso board

Fig. 120, Icons of Abstraction 3
egg tempera with carbon black, red earth pigment, gold leaf, on gesso board

Fig. 121, Icons of Abstraction 4
egg tempera with carbon black, cinnabar, and gold leaf, on gesso board

Fig.122, Icons of Abstraction 5
egg tempera with carbon black, red earth pigment, gold leaf, copper leaf, on gesso board

Fig. 123, Untitled
gold leaf on red clay bole, gesso board

Fig. 124, Untitled
egg tempera with carbon black pigment,
gold leaf, on gesso board

This attempt to move from the blackness of the formless into manifestation only led me back to blackness again. I began the two small paintings illustrated above (figs. 123 and 124) with an intention of moving forward into some kind of minimal representation, but they remained empty: one black, one gold. Maybe they just had to stay there, if only as a reminder that this is the essence of the study. This is where I want to be. With images that allow a complete emptiness and nothingness. The small gold image reflects the attempt to represent the Absolute by the painters of Man Singh's atelier, and was made soon after I had visited the Fort Museum in Jodhpur and obtained permission to view both the paintings of Bulaki and Shivdas (figs. 18, 19) in the museum's reserve collections. The images were startling in their simplicity. The vibrance of the imagery captures both the formlessness of the Absolute and an explosive emergence into form. The paintings are so much larger than the usual miniature, and were executed on a *vasli* paper made up of several layers to create a strong board-like surface. The large areas of shell gold were surprisingly roughly painted, and, on close inspection, showed signs of several alterations. This attested to the idea that these were not the usual tracings or copies that might be expected within a traditional school of painting, but something quite experimental and new. B. N. Goswamy points out, 'When it was decided to have the *Shri Nath Charit* illustrated by painters, the challenge must have been seen as nothing less than daunting. For how does one represent nothingness, and how does one move beyond it?'[43] I am aware that as I move through these sections, the words become less as the paintings become more sparse. How can the Absolute be expressed other than by these empty but infinitely deep images?

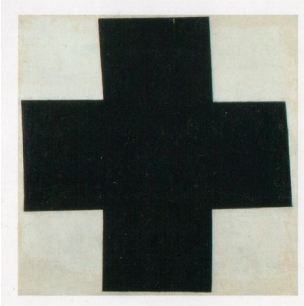
43 Goswamy, 2016, p. 269

Reflections

As I worked with imagery described in these two chapters, the paintings and writings of Malevich, Mondrian, Reinhardt and Martin were constantly in my mind. I considered Malevich's black squares and floating triangles, Reinhardt's immersions into blackness; Mondrian's distillations, Martin's vibrating grids, and also Irwin's ruminations around perception. Observations played against each other and added to understanding – both of the traditional images and the more modern. The practical work on the *yantra* and tantric abstractions, the considerations of spatial orientation, blackness and indeterminacy were echoed in the research into the more contemporary works, ideas which are explored in the final two chapters.

Chapter 6

Approaching the formless through western abstraction



The works I am drawn to direct our attention
to our attention, reminding us of the feeling
of seeing, perceiving, and knowing.

Lawrence Rinder

Fig. 126, Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematism*, 1920,
watercolour and gouache on paper
After Roger Lipsey, *An Art of our Own*, Shambala, Boston, 1988, p. 147

6. 1 *Introduction*

This chapter looks into the 'affinities' between the images of *tantra* and works of western abstraction, furthering the discussions initiated by both Virginia Whiles and Philip Rawson and introduced in Chapter 2 (see page 23). My initial intention was to investigate the influence of eastern thinking on both the early European abstractionists and the New York art scene of the 50s and 60s, but as my practical research with the images associated with *tantra* progressed, different questions began to emerge. I wanted to look more closely into the simplification or distillation into geometrical forms and the reduction to horizontals and verticals, which had become central in my work with *yantra* and which seemed to be reflected in the paintings of Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich, Agnes Martin and Ad Reinhardt. The absorption into blackness as an experience of the Absolute when working with the *liṅga* was also echoed in the black squares of both Malevich and Reinhardt. What began as a wider area of research soon consolidated into a study of these painters. While their interest in eastern thinking is clearly reflected in their writings, and will be discussed, I became more interested in the approach of these artists to their work – their methods and intentions. Both Mondrian and Malevich were clearly Utopian thinkers and hoped to change the world with their radical new art; Martin and Reinhardt were concerned with changing consciousness and perception. This was also clearly articulated by Robert Irwin, whose work is discussed within this context.

By tracing lineages of influence, I was fascinated to find consistent threads running through the research. The early work of John Woodroffe on the texts of *tantra* would have been known to certain European artists through their involvement with the Theosophical Society. Ananda Coomaraswamy was both a friend to Woodroffe and also an influence on the introduction of eastern thinking to New York artists of the 50s and 60s through his publication *The Transformation of Nature in Art*. John Cage introduced Coomaraswamy's phrase 'art imitates nature in her manner of operation' to the art world through his many performances and exhibitions made under that name. But it was a disagreement with Coomaraswamy's dismissal of contemporary art as 'self-expression', and his referral to 'the naive behaviourism of the modern "artist"',[1] that also encouraged this deeper research into the thinking and practice of the artists studied below. These threads are discussed and referenced throughout this chapter.

1 Ananda K. Coomarawamy, *The Complete Works* (ed. Roger Lipsey) Traditional Art and Symbolism: Essay 2. Oriental and Mediaeval Art, p. 43. I found this attitude to be quite common within the 'traditional art' world.

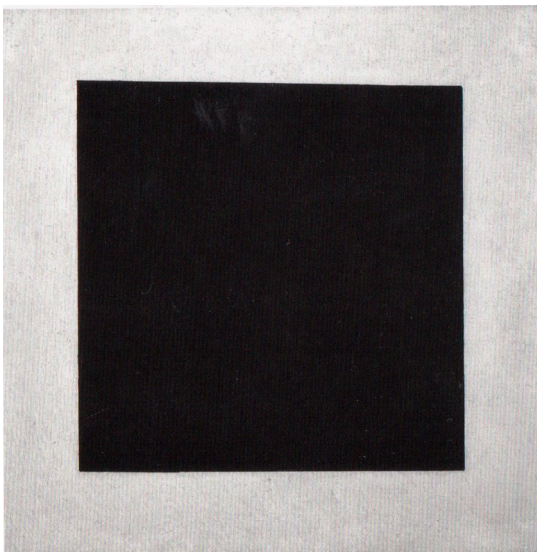


Fig. 127, Black Square, Kazimir Malevich, 1915
After *Malevich*, Tate Publications, 2014, p. 101

6. 2 *Early 20th century Europe: reduction to the essence of form*

The images that were foremost in my mind as I began the research were Malevich's *Black Square* and Mondrian's *Composition 10 in Black and White*. Both were exhibited for the first time in 1915, and while both artists were influenced by Cubism, the radical abstraction of these paintings distanced them from what had gone before. Whereas Malevich's Suprematist Quadrilaterals appeared so abruptly to the world, Mondrian worked slowly towards abstraction, gradually reducing and simplifying his landscapes over several years, until only the essence of form remained (as seen in figs. 136 and 137). Borchardt-Hume compares the two artists:

> Rather than going through a lengthy process of gradually simplifying representational schemata, eventually to arrive at non-figurative painting in the manner, for example, of his Dutch contemporary Piet Mondrian, Malevich invented, …at breathtaking speed, a new painterly language made up solely from shapes and colours. He called his language 'suprematism'.[2]

The *Black Square*, or *Black Quadrilateral*, was first exhibited in the group show 0.10 (Zero-Ten) in 1915, but it was conceived a year or so earlier, when Malevich was working on stage and costume designs for a Futurist/Dadaist play with friends. It was part of the sudden, radical move into what Malevich termed Suprematism – his search for a purely non-objective art. Malevich's Suprematist manifesto, first published in 1915, railed against the art establishment, insisting that Suprematism would purify art of its bourgeois obsession with the past. He 'disdained

2 Achim Borchardt-Hume, 'An Icon for a Modern Age,' in Borchardt-Hume (ed.), *Malevich*, Tate Publishing, London, 2014, p. 24

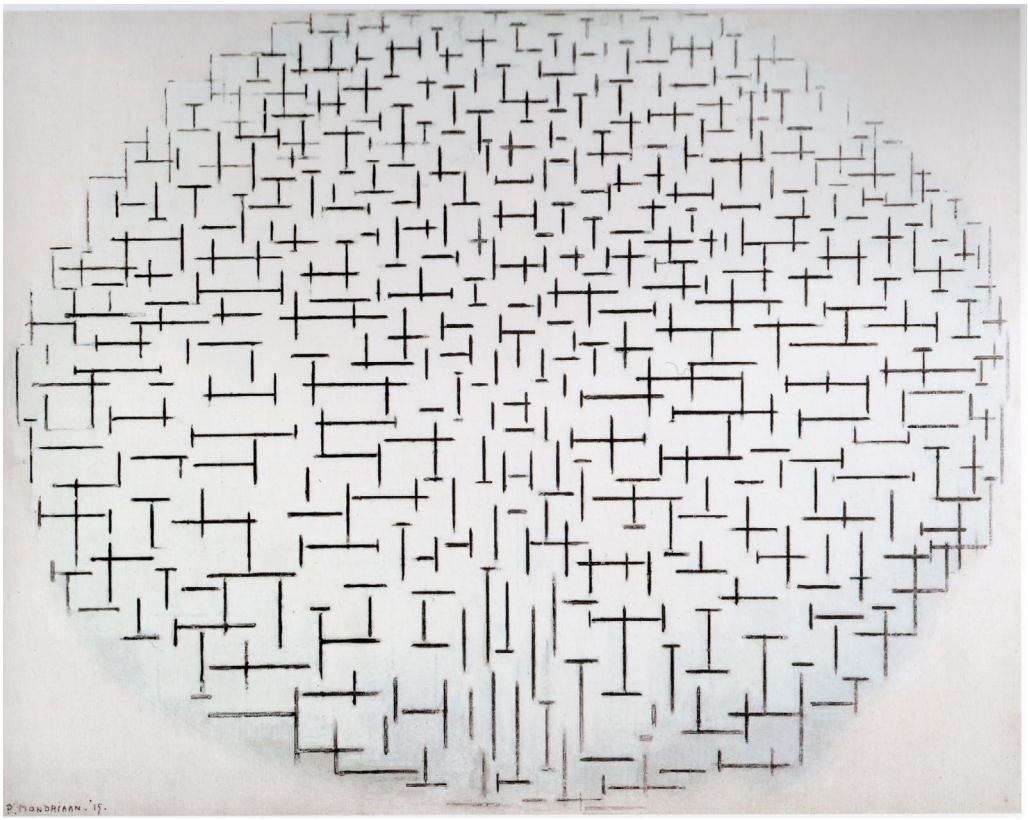


Fig. 128, Composition 10 in Black and White, Piet Mondrian, 1915
After *Mondrian*, Susanne Deicher (ed.), Taschen, 2017, p. 41

the traditional iconography of representational art',[3] suggesting in his manifesto that the art establishment is 'unable to observe the new beauty of our modern life because they live by the beauty of past ages.'[4] Malevich calls his Black Square, a 'bare icon …for my time'.[5] In the text that accompanied the 0.10 exhibition, he says,

> I have transformed myself into the zero of form and have fished myself out of the rubbishy slough of academic art. …Objects have vanished like smoke to attain the new artistic culture. …The square is not a subconscious form. It is the creation of intuitive reason. The new face of art.[6]

Whereas Malevich's black square provided an 'aesthetic shock', a sudden confrontation with pure abstraction, Mondrian's 1915 paintings were the result of this gradual distillation, a slow progression towards an infinity. 'Composition 10' is a reduction of the world to horizontals and

3 Aaron Scharf, 'Suprematism', in Nikos Stangos (ed.), *Concepts of Modern Art: from Fauvism to Postmodernism,* Thames and Hudson, London, 1994, p. 138

4 Alex Danchev, *101 Artists' Manifestos*, Penguin Classics, 2011, p. 108

5 Borchardt-Hume, in Borchardt-Hume (ed.), 2014, p. 29; also Lipsey, 1997, p. 138

6 Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art,* Shambhala, Boston, 1997, p. 138

Fig. 129, The first Suprematist exhibition, 0-10, 1915
After *Kazimir Malevich: The World as Objectless*, Kunstmuseum, Basel, 2014, p. 38

verticals, seeing through its materiality to the innate structure of things. He states: 'Abstraction is not rejection but intensification'.[7] 'Composition 10' was first exhibited in an Amsterdam gallery in November 1915, where it was seen for the first time by Theo van Doesburg. He wrote a review of the exhibition in the periodical *Eenheid* (Unity), and says of the painting:

> From a spiritual point of view, this work is superior to everything else. It gives an impression of repose, the impassivity of the soul. […] To reduce the means to a minimum and then present an artistic impression of such purity with nothing more than some white paint on a white canvas and a few horizontal and plumb lines – this is exceptional.[8]

Malevich's Suprematism exhibition and Mondrian's 'Composition 10' both came to public attention in 1915. This was the beginning of a new kind of abstraction – a development from Cubism, but finally completely rejecting any attempt at representation. In the previous year, Mondrian wrote in one of his notebooks,

> In order to bring spirituality into art, one should avoid reality as much as possible, because reality is the opposite of spirituality. It is, therefore, logical that one uses the basic forms. And because these are abstract, they result in abstract art.[9]

7 Louis Veen, ed., *Piet Mondrian: The Complete Writings*, Leiden, Primavera Pers, 2017, p. 465
8 Veen, 2017, p. 36
9 Veen, 2017, p. 33

Both Mondrian and Malevich were utopian thinkers. Both believed that they could change the world through their art. Malevich proclaimed in his Suprematist manifesto,

> Now that art, thanks to *Suprematism*, has come into its own, – that is, attained its pure, unapplied form – and has recognised the infallibility of non-objective feeling, it is attempting to set up a genuine world order, a new philosophy of life. It recognises the non-objectivity of the world and is no longer concerned with providing illustrations of the history of manners.[10]

6. 2. 1 *The Influence of the Theosophical Society*

While details of the Theosophical Society are not appropriate here, certain connections and influences are of interest as they intersect with the early transmission of *tantra*. But it is important that I make distinctions between the influence of the society on Mondrian and Malevich and on the work of Wassily Kandinsky and Hilma af Klint; similarities which I suggest have been misrepresented and may lead to misunderstandings of the work.

The Theosophical Society was established by Helena Blavatsky in 1863 in New York, and *The Secret Doctrine*, written with the assistance of her 'Himalayan spirit guides', was published in 1888. After various splits and conflicts, the society moved its headquarters to Adyar, close to Chennai. After the death of Blavatsky, the society was headed by Annie Besant – a close friend of Sir John Woodroffe and his wife.[11] Between 1900 and 1920 there was a rich cross fertilization of ideas between certain British-established art institutions (in Chennai, Kolkata and Mumbai) and the Theosophical Society, and Woodroffe is considered to have played an important part in introducing the ideas of *tantra* to the group.[12] Woodroffe was also active in the Indian Society of Oriental Art, and a patron of Abanindranath Tangore's New Bengal School of Painting, which was frequently visited by Coomaraswamy.[13] In 1910, Coomaraswamy lectured on Rajput painting at Woodroffe's house.[14] Annie Bessant and C. W. Leadbeater published their '*Thought Forms*' in 1901,[15] and between 1901 and 1910 traveled around Europe giving talks in the various

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10 Kazimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism*, Dover Publications, New York, 2003, p. 61 (Translated into German in 1927 and published in Munich as part of a series of Bauhaus books. Its first full English translation was in 1959, when it was published by MOMA, New York.)

11 Kathleen Taylor, *Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra and Bengal: 'An Indian Soul in a European Body?'*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxford, 2001, p. 43-45

12 See above, p. and Taylor, 2001

13 Taylor, 2001, p. 61

14 Taylor, 2001, p. 64

15 Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms,* Theosophical Publishing House, London, 1901, (now available as an ebook through Project-Gutenberg); also Benjamin Breen, *Victorian Occultism and the Art of Synesthesia*, The Public Domain Review, March 19, 2014

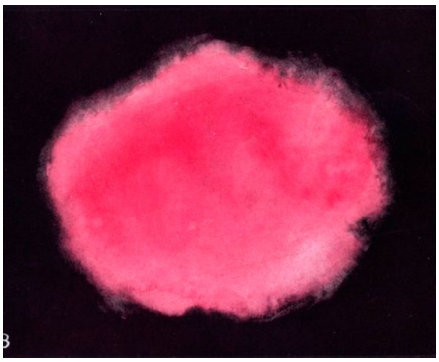

Fig. 130, *Thought Forms*, Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, 1905; 'Vague Pure Affection'

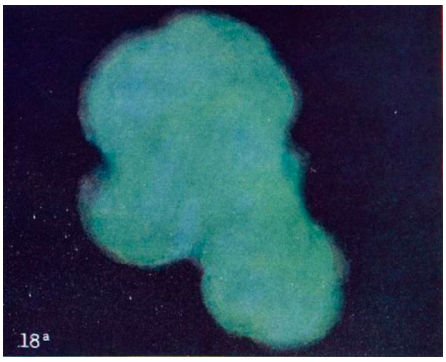

Fig. 131, *Thought Form*s, Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, 1905; 'Vague Sympathy'

Theosophical Society centers on their work on the visualization of thought-forms and early experiments in cymatics. W. B. Yeats was also a Theosophical Society member for some time, and his *tattva* cards display the simple geometric imagery associated with the primal elements (*tattva*) as they are described within tantric yoga.[16] Yeats' cards have a closer connection to the works I have studied than the ideas of Bessant and Leadbeater.

Mondrian was member of the Theosophical Society from 1909, and in a 1918 letter to van Doesberg, he says, 'I have made quite a study of Theosophy and *The Secret Doctrine* is a true foundation for all things.'[17] Roger Lipsey describes him as applying the ideas of a 'perennial philosophy' to early 20th century art, 'a first attempt to devise a visible form for these ideas.'[18] Aaron Scharf argues that Malevich's 'cosmic transcendentalism echoes the metaphysical lingo of Kandinsky and the theosophical speculations of the legendary Madame Blavatsky whose

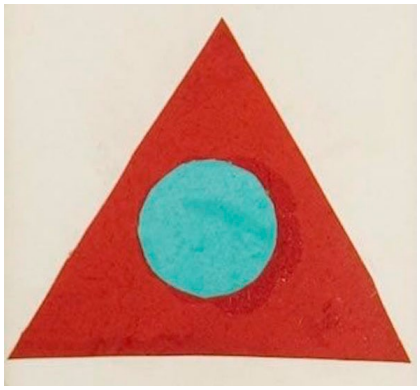

Fig. 132, W. B. Yeats, Tattva Card, public domain

Fig. 133, W. B. Yeats, Tattva Card, public domain

16 Susan Johnston Graf, *W. B. Yeats: Twentieth Century Magus*, Samuel Weiser, Maine, 2000, p. 32

17 Veen, 2017, p. 26. *The Secret Doctrine* is the Magnus Opus of Helena Blavatsky, published in New York in 1888 and translated into Dutch in 1907.

18 Lipsey, 1997, p. 69

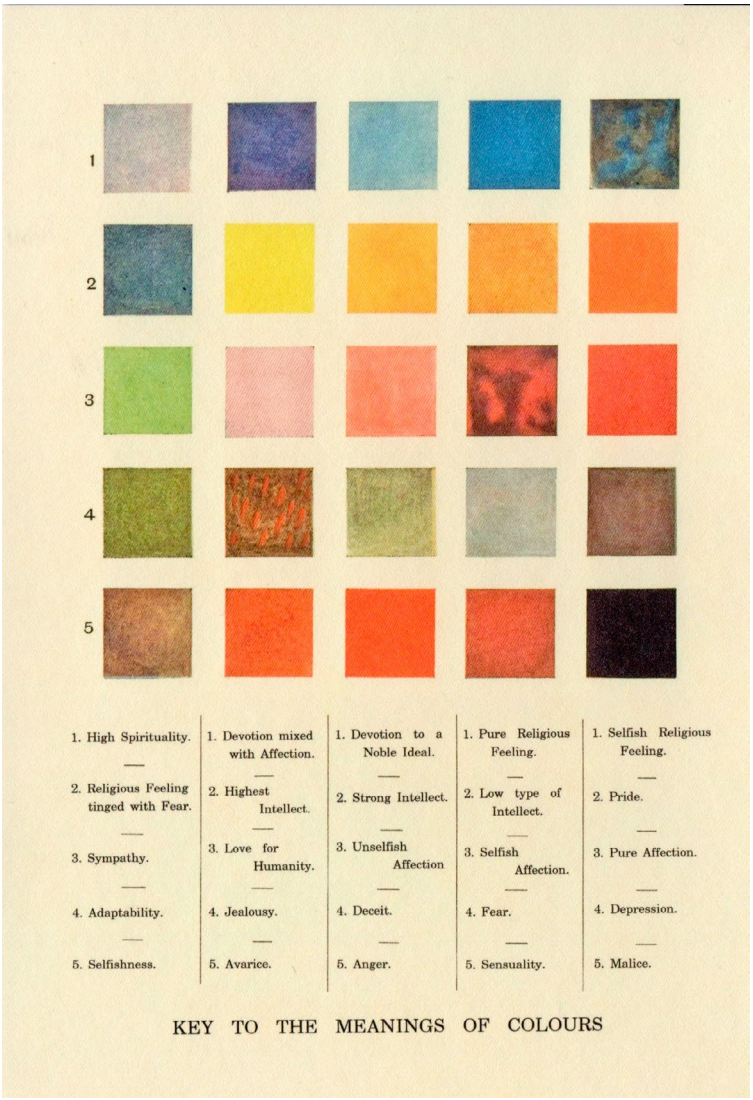

Fig. 134, 'Key to the Meaning of Colours', Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater, *Thought Forms*, 1905

germinal spirits loom large behind Malevich.'[19] But while both Mondrian and Malevich were undoubtedly familiar with theosophical ideas, Louis Veen suggests, 'All in all, in order to understand Mondrian's paintings and the writngs that stemmed from them, it is more useful to immerse oneself in Cubism than to study Aristotle, Bolland, Shoenmaekers or theosophy.'[20] Roger Lipsey points out that the teachings of Gurdieff, Ouspensky and Russian Orthodoxy remained important to Malevich, observing that the hanging of the 1915 *Suprematist* exhibition resembled an assemblage of icons, with his *Black Square* placed high up in the corner of the room, in what would traditionally be the position of the central icon (see fig 128).[21]

19 Scharf, in Stangos (ed.), 1994, p. 139

20 Veen, 2017, p. 31

21 Lipsey, 1997, p. 137

While the recent Tate Modern exhibition *Hilma af Klint & Piet Mondrian: Forms of Life* showed the work of both artists in the context of Theosophical Society mysticism and the essence that underlies form, rather than uniting the two, the show succeeded only in highlighting their difference. Af Klint attended several of Bessant and Leadbeater's talks at the Stockholm Theosophical Society,[22] and her early abstractions, called 'astral paintings', were a record of visions experienced during séances.[23] Both af Klint and Kandinsky were aware of '*Thought Forms*',[24] and both followed Rudolf Steiner when he broke away from Theosophy and formed the Anthroposophical Society. Af Klint continually pursued Steiner's approval of her work, citing his lack of support as the reason she insisted on her paintings being hidden from public view for several years after her death.[25] Maybe the difference between this influence on Mondrian and af Klint is best summed up in a letter Mondrian wrote to van Doesburg in which he states, 'while Steiner might understand the spiritual world, he understands very little about art.'[26]

Bessant and Leadbeater's experiments with the colour of emotion, or the psychic emanations from music, would be considered in theosophical teachings to be part of the "astral" realm, accessible through the "subtle" senses.[27] It is important that I distinguish the tantric imagery studied within this research from these thought-form illustrations and "chakra visualisations" of Besant and Leadbeater. While their imagery most definitely influenced the work of Kandinsky and af Klint,[28] and seems to echo various current discussions on the subject of synaesthesia, this is not apparent in that of Mondrian and Malevich: a difference possibly referred to in Malevich's insistence that 'the square is not a subconscious form. It is the creation of intuitive reason.' (See above.)

What became clear to me through examining their work and writings, is that while both Malevich and Mondrian were interested in the various spiritual and philosophical movements of their time, their discoveries came through their art – their work is not an illustration of philosophical ideas, nor of mystical visions, but rather, they found within the ideas of their time a resonance with their own thinking and the discoveries they made through their work.

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22 The influence of both Theosophy and Anthroposophy on af Klint is well documented in Julia Voss, *Hilma af Klint: A Biography*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2022

23 Voss, 2022, p. 124

24 Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms,* Theosophical Publishing House, London, 1901, (now available as an ebook through Project-Gutenberg); also Benjamin Breen, *Victorian Occultism and the Art of Synesthesia*, The Public Domain Review, March 19, 2014. See also Sixten Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study of the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting*, 2022 (Originally published in 1970 by Äbo Akademi, Sweden.)

25 See, for example, Voss, 2022, p. 300

26 Curator's notation; Tate Modern, May 2023

27 See for example, Leadbeater, *The Chakras*, Theosophical Publishing House, Wheaton, Ill, (1927)

28 Voss, 2022, Ringbom, 2022

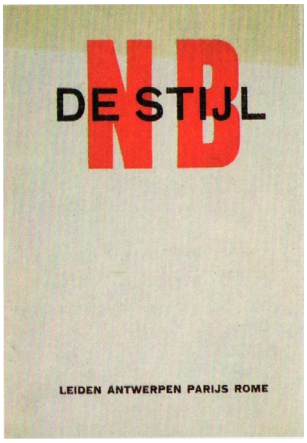

Fig. 135, De Stijl, 1921
After Deicher, 2017, p. 56

6. 2. 2 *Horizontals, verticals and simple geometries*

The important element in the work of both Mondrian and Malevich is their distillation of form to its essence, to horizontals, verticals and simple geometries. After reading van Doesburg's review of his 'Composition 10', Mondrian made contact, and the two went on to form the DeStijl group, which also included the Neo-platonist philosopher and mathematician Mathieu Schoenmaekers, (1875-1944).[29] In 1915 Schoenmaekers published his *The New Image of the World,* which advocated the 'neoplastic ideal of a world of universal harmony'.[30] In the introduction to his book Schoenmaekers states, 'We strive to comprehend nature in such a way that we perceive the inner construction of reality.'[31] Mondrian echoes Schoenmaekers' ideas when in 1917 he writes, 'The two fundamental complete contraries which shape our earth are: the horizontal line of power, that is the course of the earth around the sun, and the vertical, profoundly special movement of rays that originate in the centre of the sun.'[32] And in an article for the *DeStijl* magazine in 1918, he states: 'We perceive the duality of the straight line in the way it is placed. In its duality, the straight line may be the one extreme as well as the other: the natural [horizontal] as well as the spiritual [vertical] element.'[33]

Mondrian had already arrived at these ideas through his radically simplified 1915 painting, in which horizontal and vertical lines hover within the space of their containing ovoid. Bridget Riley says of this work: 'In the final painting an immensity of sensation opens up: one feels oneself surrounded by the sparkling stillness and the rhythmic movement of some boundless continuum.'[34] In his article, 'Towards a True Vision of Reality' Mondrian writes:

> I felt that this reality can only be expressed through pure plastics. In its essential expression, pure plastics unconditioned by subjective feeling and conception. …To create pure reality plastically, it is necessary to reduce natural forms to the *constant elements* of form and natural colour to *primary* colour.[35]

29 Veen, 2017; Kenneth Frampton, 'De Stijl', in Stangos (ed.) 1994, p. 141
30 Frampton, in Stangos (ed.) 1994, p. 154
31 Veen, 2017, p. 25
32 *Concepts of Modern Art, DeStijl*, p. 142
33 Veen, 2017, p. 25
34 Bridget Riley, 'Mondrian Perceived', in *Piet Mondrian: Nature to Abstraction*, Tate Gallery Publishing, London, 1997, p. 12
35 Piet Mondrian, 'Towards a True Vision of Reality', in Harry Holzman and Martin James (eds.), *Piet Mondrian, The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, Boston, 1986, pp. 338-9

Fig 136, Piet Mondrian,
Flowering Appletree, 1912
After Deicher (ed.), 2017, p. 33

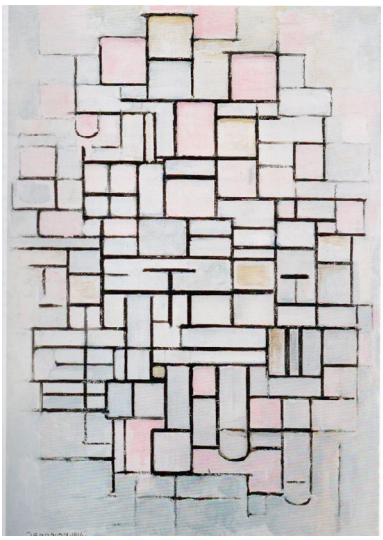

Fig. 137, Piet Mondrian,
Composition No. 4, 1914
After Deicher (ed.), 2017, p. 37

It is this reduction to essence of form, and what may lie behind form, which separates the work of Mondrian and Malevich from other painters exploring abstraction at this time. The early horizontals and verticals of Mondrian, and particularly the succession of studies which culminated in his breakthrough painting of 1915 were a gradual and methodological reduction of elements until only the essentials remained. Malevich speaks similarly of line and plane in his *Non-Objective World*, stating,

> The culture of *Suprematism* can manifest itself in two different ways, namely as dynamic *Suprematism* of the plane, (with the additional element of the "suprematist straight line" or as static *Suprematism* in space (with the additional element of the "suprematist square").[36]

While the horizontals and verticals of Mondrian still have some reference to space and time, Malevich wanted to rid himself even of those restrictions. He wrote, 'I transformed myself *in the zero of form* …I destroyed the ring of the horizon that confines the artist and forms of nature.'[37] He suggests that it is the 'pure artistic feeling' which is present in all great works of art that remains throughout time, that it is the 'pure feeling for plastic relationships' that reside within an ancient temple, for example, that is 'eternally valid and vital', not the social order which it once encompassed – 'this is dead'.[38] Both Mondrian and Malevich were concerned with the timeless, the universal rather than the personal or even the social and cultural. Mondrian wrote in 1919: 'The new imaging may be called abstract, not only because this is the direct imaging of what is

36 Malevich, 2003, p. 61

37 Masha Chlenova, 'Language, Space and Abstraction', in Borchardt-Hume (ed.), 2014, p. 69

38 Malevich, 2003, p. 78

universal, but also because it excludes the imaging of the individual'.[39] And later, 'Through our intuition, the universal in us can become so active … that it pushes aside our individuality. Then art can reveal itself.'[40]

Despite their radical abstraction and simple geometric form, these early works of Mondrian and Malevich are very clearly hand-made. In his essay on Suprematism, Aaron Scharf mentions Malevich's small drawings of the basic Suprematist elements, pointing out that they are hand-drawn in pencil:

> 'Not black, but grey, they were carefully and deliberately shaded in with a pencil. The square and its permutations: the cross, the rectangle, were meant to show the signs of the hand – an assertion of the human agency – and this is central to the philosophy of Suprematism.'[41]

Observing a Mondrian painting close up, the surface is not perfect, the lines hand-drawn, the edges of shapes unsure, often revealing over-painting and maybe a deliberate shadow of what lay beneath. All these small inconsistencies give the work its dynamic tensions – its vibrations, which are often invisible in reproduction. Malevich's Squares are rarely square, his geometries slightly off-kilter. When asked why he had made his suprematist drawings in pencil he said, 'Because that is the humblest act the human sensibility can perform.'

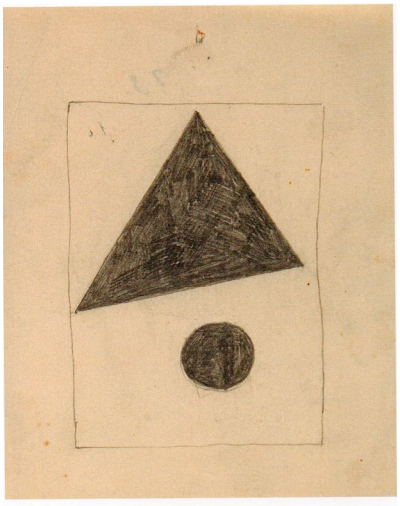

Fig 138, Composition 5-i, pencil on paper, 1915-16, *Kasimir Malevich*, Annely Juda Fine Art, 2022

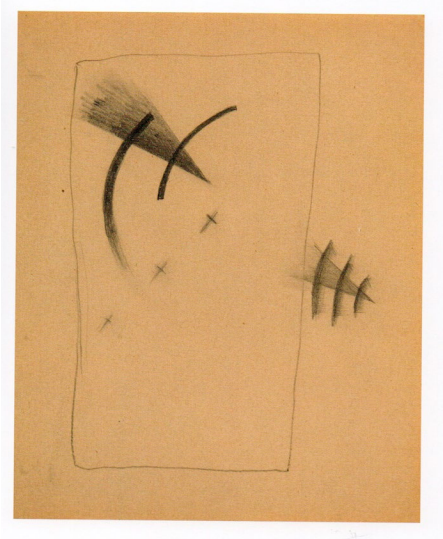

Fig. 139, Magnetic Electric Sensation, pencil on paper, 1917-18, *Kasimir Malevich*, Annely Juda Fine Art, 2022

39 Veen, 2017, p. 19. (From an article published in De Stijl no 2, 5th March 1919)

40 Lipsey, 1997, p. 67 (Quoting *Collected Writings: The New Art – The New Life*, Boston, 1986)

41 Scharf, in Stangos (ed.) 1994, p. 138

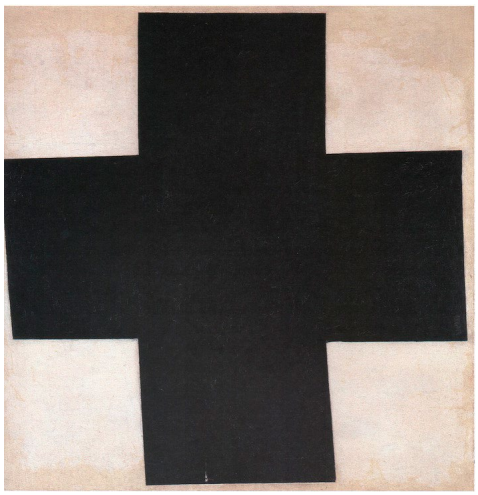

Fig. 140, Kazimir Malevich, Cross, 1915
After *Malevich*, Tate Publications, 2014, p. 112

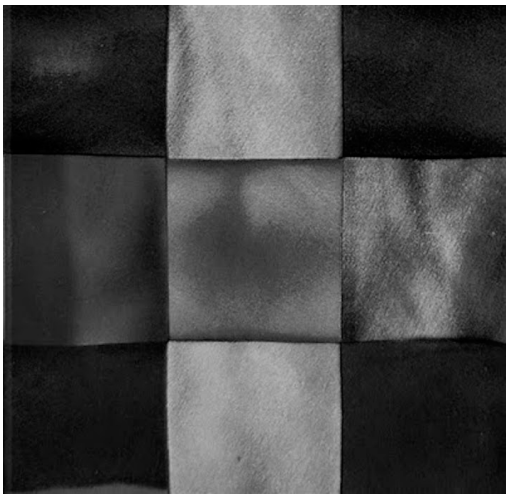

Fig. 141, Ad Reinhardt, Small Painting for T. M., 1958; After *The Third Mind*, 2009, p. 300

6. 3 *Columbia University and Mid 20th century New York*

The pure, minimal, geometric abstraction of Malevich and Mondrian in the 1910s was not seen again until the 1950s and 60s in the work of Agnes Martin and Ad Reinhardt. Both worked their way through the kind of ill-defined, neo-cubist abstractions that were current in the US during the 30s and 40s, and it was not until the late 50s and early 60s that they produced their most interesting and refined work which is central to this part of the research. I find Reinhardt's later black paintings and Martin's early grids, painted around the same time, to be the most compelling expression of an approach to formlessness in painting, evoking an 'immediacy of perception' and an insistence on silent attention.

While the early 20th century abstractionists were exposed to a version of Indian philosophical thinking via the Theosophical Society, it was a more East Asian influence which dominated mid-century New York, particularly that of Zen. But both Ananda Coomaraswamy and Heinrich Zimmer also exert their presence here. In this section I trace this lineage of influences and consider its effect on these artists. As the research progressed it was again the approach of the artists to their work that took on a greater significance and began to reflect my learning through engagement with the traditional arts. In relation to these mid-20th century painters, it was the methods of making and the effect of the work on the viewer which drew my attention. Through my own making processes, and a deeper engagement with the artists through both their work and their writings, I was drawn to consider the capacity of artworks to affect consciousness and perception, and here found the reflections of Robert Irwin on his work to be helpful. The final part of this section references John Cage's interactions with the writings of Coomaraswamy, and discusses the ideas of chance and natural processes, reflecting back to studies of materiality.

6. 3. 1 *Lineage of Influences*

The writings of both Ad Reinhardt and Agnes Martin reflect an interest in eastern thinking and a familiarity with certain texts. Both attended Columbia University, where a lineage of influence can be traced back to the early 20th century. In the 1890s, after several years living in Japan and China and teaching philosophy at Tokyo University, Ernest Fenollosa established a collection of Japanese art at the Boston Museum.[42] Arthur Dow assisted Fenollosa at the museum, and in 1899 published *Composition: A Series of Exercises Selected from a New System of Art Education,* which was derived from his study of Japanese art, and became the most widely read book on art theory in the first half of the 20th century.[43] Dow went on to become head of Fine Art at Columbia University's Teachers College, where John Dewey also taught from 1906.[44] Dow and Dewey travelled in China and Japan in 1919-1920, and in 1926 Dewey co-founded the China Institute in New York City. His seminal *Art as Experience* was published in 1934, and would have been known by Reinhardt and Martin. He writes, 'Elimination gets rid of forces that confuse, distract, and deaden. Order, rhythm and balance, simply means that energies significant for experience are acting at their best.'[45] Later in the book, Dewey echoes the earlier writings of Malevich and Mondrian: 'Feeling and perception …reconcile the individual with the universal, by exciting in him an 'impersonal emotion'.[46]

This strong connection with eastern art and philosophy at Columbia University established by Dow and Dewey continued with lectures by Heinrich Zimmer in the 1940s.[47] These lectures were edited by Joseph Campbell into his *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, and

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42 Though his scholarship was appreciated in both Tokyo and Beijing at the time, Fenollosa has more recently been discredited by both Japanese and Chinese scholars for imposing a westernised system of art education, which echoed the imposition of British standards in India. It has been claimed that his main interest was in Ukiyoe, Japanese woodblock prints, which were considered to be outside the concerns of 'real art' to Chinese and Japanese historians and collectors. See, Julia Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *Twentieth Century China*, Vol 32 No 1, p.14. *The Japanese Impact on the Republican Art World.* Fenollosa was accused by art historian Omura Seigai of the 'Europeanizaton' of Japanese and subsequently Chinese art education, to the detriment of Chinese traditions. Similarly criticised are Lawrence Binyon's 1908 *Painting in the Far East*, and Arthur Waley's *An Introduction to the Study of Chinese Painting*, with the apt comment: 'the glories of the two men's lyrical prose would not have survived translation'. A reminder that ideas must be seen in the context of their time.

43 Ikuyo Nakagawa's Chronology in Alexandra Munroe (Ed), *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*, New York, Solomon Guggenheim Foundation, 2009, p. 383 In 1917, Ananda Coomaraswamy established the department of South Asian art at the Boston Museum, bequesting his collections of Indian Art. Lawrence Binyon, who headed the Asian collections at the British Museum at that time, was a regular visitor and gave talks at the Boston Museum, which were gathered together in his *The Spirit of Man in Asian Art*.

44 Nakagawa, in Munroe 2009

45 Dewey, 2005 (1934), p. 192

46 Dewey, 2005 (1934), p. 193

47 Zimmer's Columbia lectures were edited by Joseph Campbell into the Bollingen publication *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1972

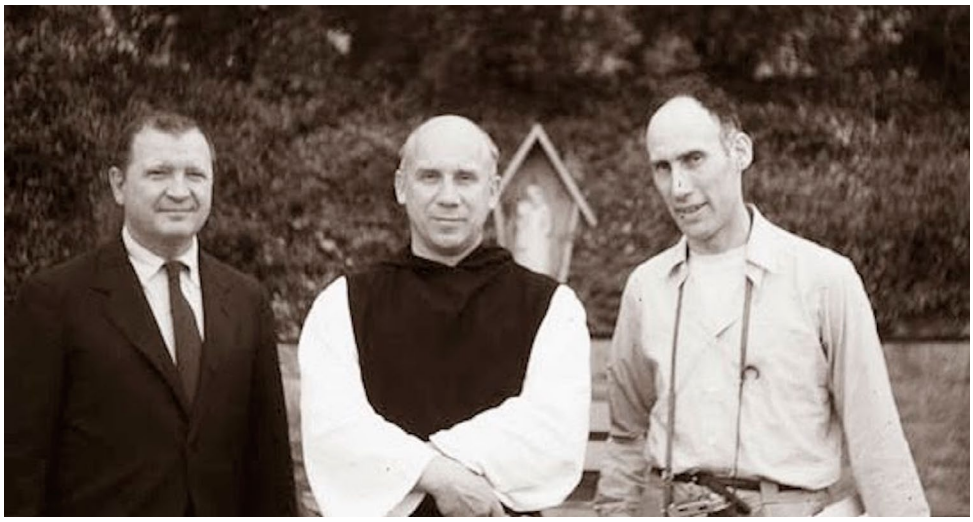

Fig. 142, Ad Reinhardt and Robert Lax visiting Thomas Merton at Gethsemani.
After 'Robert Lax', *Beshara Magazine*, Issue 12, Spring 2019

published in the Bollingen series in 1946. Both Zimmer and Campbell were regular guests at the house of Coomaraswamy, as was John Cage.[48] The Columbia lectures continued throughout the 50s and 60s, when D. T. Suzuki gave evening talks, attended, amongst others, by John Cage, Arthur Danto and Ad Reinhardt.[49]

Reinhardt was introduced to the writings of Coomaraswamy by Alfred Salmony, his Art History teacher at Columbia, where he also met his life-long friend Thomas Merton.[50] In a later correspondence with Merton, he cites Coomaraswamy as one of his greatest influences.[51] After training at the Cornish School in Seattle and several years of teaching, Agnes Martin attended Columbia Teachers College during the 40s and 50s, and became a close friend of Reinhardt's.[52] Both Reinhardt and Martin reference eastern philosophy in their writings,[53] and Reinhardt in

48 E. J. Crooks, 'John Cage's Entanglement with the Ideas of Coomaraswamy', PhD thesis, University of York, 2011; David James Clark, *The Influence of Oriental Thought on Postwar American Painting and Sculpture,* Garland Publishing Inc., New York and London, 1988, p. 79-83. Published version of Clark's PhD thesis, Courtauld Institute, London. (https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/37885886.pdf)

49 See eg: Clark, 1988; Ellen Pearlman, *Nothing and Everything: The Influence of Buddhism on the American Avant-Garde 1942-1962,* Berkeley, Evolver Editions, 2012; Jacquelynn Baas, *Asian Philosophy: New Dimensions for Art, 1945-1975*; Mark Levy, *Void in Art,* Bramble Books, 2006; Jacquelynn Baas, 'Before Zen: The Nothing of American Dada' in *East-West Interchanges in American Art: A Long and Tumultuous Relationship*, Cynthia Mills, Lee Glazer, Amelia A. Goerlitz (eds.), Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, Washington DC, 2009

50 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Story Mountain*, London, SPCK, 1990

51 Lipsey, 1997, p. 328

52 Nancy Princenthal, *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art*, New York, Thames and Hudson, 2015

53 In his 'Twelve Rules for a New Academy' published in *Art News*, Reinhardt quotes from *Zhuangzi*: 'The pure old men of old slept without dreams and waked without anxiety.' Martin refers to the writings of John Blofeld on Chinese poetry, and also to *Zhuangzi,* using the phase 'free and easy wandering' which is the title of *Zhuangzi* chapter 2. Agnes Martin, *Writings*, Winterthur, Cantz Kunstmuseum, 1991, pp. 16 and 71

his regular correspondence with Merton.[54] Merton's friend John Wu translated the *Daode Jing* which was first published in 1961, and would have been known by both Reinhardt and Martin.[55] Encouraged by Wu, Merton published his own collections of writings from the *Zhuangzi* in 1965.[56] Merton met with D. T. Suzuki several times in the early 1960s,[57] and they continued to communicate until Suzuki's death in 1966.

The influence of eastern thinking, and specifically of Zen, on Abstract Expressionism is well documented; much has been written on D. T. Suzuki's lecture series at Columbia University in the 1950s and 60s and Cage's influence on its transmission to the art world.[58] But while the lectures were undoubtedly of importance, the New York Zen Centre was already well-established by that time, and Cage originally came into contact with Asian thinking in the 1930s when visiting the Cornish School, where Mark Tobey and Morris Graves organised lectures on eastern philosophy.[59] Cage cites Tobey as an important influence.[60] While teaching at Black Mountain College, Cage delivered a reading of the complete text of Tang Dynasty Ch'an (Zen) master Huang Po's *Universal Mind*.[61] Thomas Merton owned a copy of John Blofeld's translation of the text,[62] and Martin also referenced the text in her writings.[63]

> This Mind which is without beginning, is unborn and indestructible. It is not green or yellow, it has neither form nor appearance. It does not belong to the category of things that exist or things that do not exist. …It is that which you see before you – begin to reason about it and you at once fall into error. It is like the boundless void which cannot be fathomed or measured.[64]

While Reinhardt and Martin were clearly familiar with Asian thought, Robert Irwin suggests that in L.A. in the 60s they were all vaguely interested in Zen but no-one really read much. 'It was

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54 Agnes Martin, 1991; Barbara Rose, (ed.) *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991; Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, Vol. 7, Harper, San Francisco, 1999

55 Merton, 1990; Roger Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes, The Art of Thomas Merton*, Brattleboro, Echo Point Books, 2006

56 Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu,* New Directions, New York, 1965

57 Roger Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton*, Brattleboro, EPBM, 2006

58 Pearlman, 2012; Baas, in Mills, Glazer, Goerlitz (eds.) 2009

59 Ikuyo Nakagawa, 'Chronology' in Alexandra Munroe (ed.), *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*, New York, Solomon Guggenheim Foundation, 2009, p. 389

60 *Every Day is a Good Day, The Visual Art of John Cage*, Hayward Publications, London, 2010, p. 49

61 Calvin Thompkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of our Time*, Penguin Books, New York, 1981, p. 73

62 https://merton.bellarmine.edu/files/original/455e66eaae5139abc344520119a5c65f2166948f.pdf

63 Martin, 1991, p. 16

64 *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po: on the Transmission of Mind,* translated by John Blofeld, Grove Press Inc, New York, 1959

rather that certain Zen themes were in the air.'[65] He describes some of his small paintings of that time as '"Zen-like", in the meditative sense', but insists that his knowledge of Zen was minimal.[66] During the 1950s and 60s there was often a lack of discrimination and a general confusion of the various eastern traditions. John Cage's use of the *Yi Jing* (*Book of Changes*) is often casually linked with Zen, whereas, as an ancient Chinese divination text, it has its origins 1,000 years before Confucius and Laozi, and close to 2,000 years before the beginnings of Zen (Ch'an) in China. Arthur Danto's essay 'Upper West Side Buddhism' suggests that while he was interested in Buddhism as a philosophy, and as the tool which allowed him to consider that there may be no distinction between 'art' and 'life', (and which led to his acclaimed essay on the Warhol Brillo boxes) he stated that he has never had any intention of engaging in its practices.[67] But despite certain confusions, it is clear that various forms of 'eastern thinking' became popular during the 1950s and 60s, and although there was often little discrimination between the various teachings, there was most definitely an opening to a different sensibility, and a search for a language more appropriate to the discussion of current art forms. Jacquelynn Baas points out:

> Thanks in part to the publications and teaching of Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (1870-1966), the term "Zen" came to designate a form of access to "pure experience" that transcends language and thought. Artists immediately made the connection with access to non-intellectual experience available through art.[68]

In her introduction to the publication which accompanied the 2009 Guggenheim exhibition, 'The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia' Alexandra Munroe suggests,

> Artists working in America selectively adapted Eastern ideas and art forms to create not only new styles of art, but more importantly, a new theoretical definition of the contemplative experience and self-transformative role of art itself.[69]

The reflections of Baas and Monroe point back to Dewey's concept of an 'immediacy of perception',[70] and to the ability of this influx of 'eastern thinking' to provide tools to discuss the current sensibilities emerging through abstraction and minimalism: Baas's 'non-intellectual experience available through art'. According to Simon Morley: 'Zen was especially important in

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65 Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing one Sees: Over Thirty Years of Conversations with Robert Irwin,* Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008, p. 62

66 Weschler, 2008, p. 62

67 In Baas and Jacob (eds.) *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2004

68 Jacquelynn Baas, *Asian Philosophy: New Dimensions for Art, 1945-1975*; p. 4-5

69 Munroe, 2009, p. 22

70 As discussed above, this phrase was used by John Dewey in his 1934 publication, *Art as Experience* (Berkeley Publishing Group, New York, 1980) where he describes 'esthetic experience' as 'a matter of immediacy of perception'. p. 169

expanding Western conceptions of normative consciousness, and was understood to call for the suspension of analysis, to welcome indeterminacy, and to prioritize non-conceptual knowing.'[71]

The interconnections of Martin, Reinhardt and Merton, the lineage of teaching through Columbia, and the writings of Coomaraswamy and Dewey, proved to be a valuable source of insight throughout the research process, drawing the ideas and experiences gained through engagement with the traditional arts through to their more contemporary expression in mid-20th century minimalism. It became clear that both Martin and Reinhardt looked to more traditional ways of working – but to the traditions of the east and the classical past, rather than of western lineages. Though Reinhardt always referred back to Malevich, and often mentioned that he was born in the year of the iconic Black Square.[72] After obtaining a master's degree in Asian art history, Reinhardt went on to teach Asian art at Brooklyn College. His first eastern travels were to the 'Islamic Lands', and he writes to Merton about his identification with 'anti-imagists, anti-idolatrists, pro-iconoclasts, and non-objectivists'.[73] Martin later describes her work as being 'in the classical tradition'.[74] Reinhardt's sudden death in 1967 is cited as a factor in Martin's decision to leave New York and to give up painting for several years.[75] After he finally gained permission to leave his monastery, Merton spent several months in India and was on his way to Japan when he met with his mysterious death while attending an 'inter-faith' conference in Bangkok in 1969.[76] It is a shame that Merton could no longer communicate with Reinhardt during his travels in Asia. Reinhardt would have appreciated his friend's insights. I was particularly moved by his description of the rock formations and carvings in Mahabalipurum which he visited during the last stages of his journey through India, and which echoed my own experiences of the site. Maybe Merton was thinking of Reinhardt when, just a month or so before his death, he wrote in his diary:

> The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with *dharmakaya* – everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination …my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise. This is Asia in its purity. …And because it needs nothing it can afford to be silent, unnoticed, undiscovered.[77]

71 Simon Morley, '"Free and easy wandering": Agnes Martin and the limits of intercultural dialogue', *World Art*, DOI: 10.1080/21500894.2016.1145132, 2016, pp. 3-4

72 Barbara Rose, *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt,* University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991 (1979), p. 4

73 Munroe, 2012, p. 287

74 Martin, 1991, p. 19

75 Princenthal, 2015, p. 146

76 Merton, 1999

77 Merton, 1999, p. 324

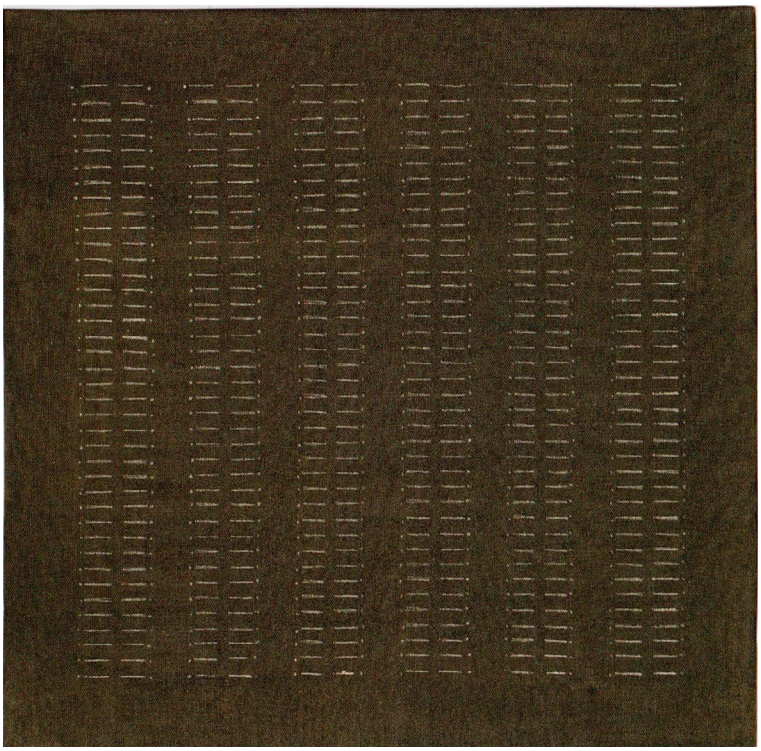

Fig. 143, Agnes Martin, Starlight, 1962, Oil on canvas
After Agnes Martin, Writings, Cantz, 1992, p. 5

6. 3. 2 *The approach to the work: methods, processes and intentions*

Agnes Martin and Ad Reinhardt wrote extensively about their work and arts practice, and these writings, their own descriptions of their processes and intentions, form the basis of the next part of the study. Reinhardt's writings were collected by Barbara Rose in her 1991 compilation, *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt* [78] and an important collection of Martin's talks and writings were published as *Agnes Martin: Writings*, by Winterthur in 1991.[79] Correspondence between Reinhardt and Thomas Merton also contains interesting insights into Reinhardt and his work.[80] Nancy Princenthal's *Agnes Martin: her Life and Work* is also referenced.

Close observation of Martin's grids and Reinhardt's black squares reveals a depth of surface completely absent from the many hard-edged, often acrylic abstractions made at that time, and suggests a laborious painting process. Discussing the processes of both Martin and Reinhardt, Princenthal proposes,

> Like Reinhardt's black squares, the lineaments of Martin's grids are only visible at close range and can disappear entirely when photographed. And their execution requires feats of

78 Rose (ed.), 1991

79 Martin, 1991

80 See for example, Merton, 1990; Merton, 1999; Lipsey, 2006

Fig. 144, Ad Reinhardt, Abstract Painting, 1960-1966
After *The Third Mind*, 2009, p. 303

> patience and care.…This involvement in process, in repetitive and demanding – or, it could also be said, meditative – work for its own sake, characterizes Martin's paintings as well. [81]

Michael Corris says of Reinhardt's process, 'The work of producing a 'black' painting was painstaking, delicate and, above all, tedious.…Reinhardt favored labor-intensive studio methods, which he described in various manifestos as a kind of *ritual*.'[82] He refers to a more traditional approach, and here an eastern approach, to painting when he states, 'For thousands of years artists in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions did the same empty images over and over again. A timeless idea.'[83] Alexandra Munroe suggests, 'Reinhardt based his repetitive, proscribed craft, which culminated in his black paintings, on the ritualised and diagrammatic approach to object-making in Islamic as well as Asian cultures.'[84] He insists, 'The one direction in fine or abstract art today is the painting of the one same form over and over again. [85]

81 Princenthal, 2015, p. 100. (Also published in Art World, January 1st 2019, as 'Art Requires a Relaxation of Control: How Agnes Martin Gave Up Intellectualism to Harness Her Inspiration.')

82 Michael Corris, *Ad Reinhardt*, London, Reaktion Books, 2005, p. 97

83 Rose (ed.), 1991, p. 17-18

84 Munroe, 2012, p. 287 Mark Levy likens Reinhardt's 3 x 3 grids to the Diamond World *maṇḍala* of Mahayana Buddhism, Levy, 2006, p. 144. See Pamela D. Whitfield, *Icons and Iconoclasm in Japanese Buddhism*, Oxford University Press, 2013

85 Rose (ed.), 1991, p. 58

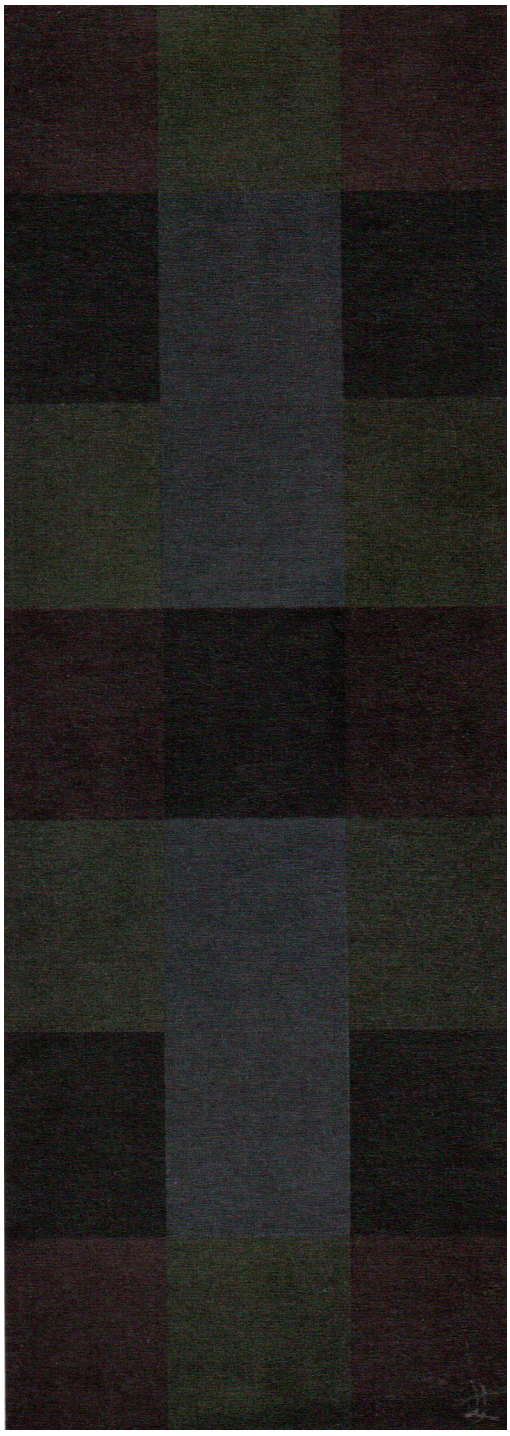

Fig. 145, Ad Reinhardt, Abstract Painting, 1958
After *Art of the 20th Century*, 2000, p. 293

In Reinhardt's black paintings, each of the nine inner squares is intricately painted with shades of grey/black. While the final image may initially appear to be a solid 5ft x 5ft black square, subtle differences and changes in tone gradually emerge, until the whole surface obtains a depth, the underlying grid slowly emerges, and the viewer becomes immersed in a vibration of formlessness. He described this later work as 'expressionless, clear, quiet, dignified, negative, detached, timeless…'[86] And stated, 'The one intensity and the one perfection come only from long and lonely routine attention and repetition.'[87] 'Making it purer and emptier, more absolute and more exclusive – non-objective, non-representational, non-figurative, non-imagist, non-expressionist, non-subjective.'[88] While making every attempt to hide the mark of the brush, Reinhardt insisted on careful methodical hand painting.[89]

The grids of Agnes Martin always contain the small imperfections of the hand drawn line – described by Anna Lovatt as her 'shimmering line'.[90] This is a line that has vitality, but it is not the vitality of gestural self-expression. Lovatt stresses that rather than emphasise the irregularities in her line, Martin attempts to neutralise them. She refers to Roland Barthes'

86 Rose (ed.), 1991, p. 22

87 Rose 1991, p. 58

88 Rose, 1991, p. 53

89 For many years, both Reinhardt and Irwin did not allow their work to be photographed. The subtlety of the gradation of grey and black almost impossible to see in reproduction. The painting, as with all Reinhardt's paintings of this time, is made with the same nine-square cross as in fig. 141. The subtlety is seen more easily in fig. 145.

90 Anna Lovatt, 'In Pursuit of the Neutral: Agnes Martin's Shimmering Line', in *Agnes Martin*: Frances Morris and Tiffany Bell (eds.), Tate Publishing, London, 2015. pp. 100-106

'degree zero' – a form a writing stripped down and emptied of metaphor – and suggests that Martin's line is a kind of 'drawing degree zero'.[91] The line is not "personal" but 'subtly diffuses its representational and autographic functions'.[92] The insistence on the hand-drawn, while also aiming to eradicate the personal and gestural, sets up an interesting tension, which Martin addresses in her many references to perfection and imperfection. In a lecture to students she says,

> I hope I have made it clear that the work is *about* perfection as we are aware of it in our minds but that the paintings are very far from being perfect – completely removed in fact – even as we ourselves are. …We must surrender the idea that this perfection that we see in the mind is obtainable or attainable. It is really far from us. …But our happiness lies in moments of awareness of it. The function of art work is the stimulation of sensibilities, the renewal of moments of perfection.[93]

Martin refers to what she calls 'the untroubled mind', a meditative state, free of personal concerns, which she equates to freedom, and the state of mind necessary for her work. 'Being detached and impersonal is related to freedom. That's the answer for inspiration. The untroubled mind.'[94] She suggests that this can elicit a similar state in the viewer. 'Artists try to maintain an atmosphere of freedom in order to represent the perfection of those moments. And others searching for the meaning of art respond by recalling their own free moments.'[95] Martin proposes that this response is possible when perfection is held in the mind and translated through the hand, not with the aim of making a prefect copy, or a geometrically accurate image, but a sincere attempt to convey what, to Martin, has been seen, received, understood.

Both Reinhardt and Martin insisted on the hand-drawn, and saw the repetition inherent in their work methods as a kind of ritual. They implied that the repetition and sustained concentration of their work brings about an immersion – for the painter, but also for the viewer. Both discussed a more traditional approach to art, turning away from the 'self-expression' of abstract expressionism, towards a more 'traditional' approach to practice.[96] In her Editor's Note to Reinhardt's writings on Abstraction, Barbara Rose observes:

> Reinhardt saw beyond the present crisis and demanded a renewal of the traditional bases of art. However, his new basis might reject much of the Western tradition, with its ideas of perpetual 'progress' – the advance in some linear direction towards some

91 Lovatt, 2015, p. 102

92 Lovatt, 2015. p. 102

93 Martin, 1991, pp. 15, 69

94 Martin, 1991, p. 39

95 Martin, 1991, p. 74

96 'Ad Reinhardt: Interview with Bruce Glasser', *Art International*, Winter 1966-67, p. 22

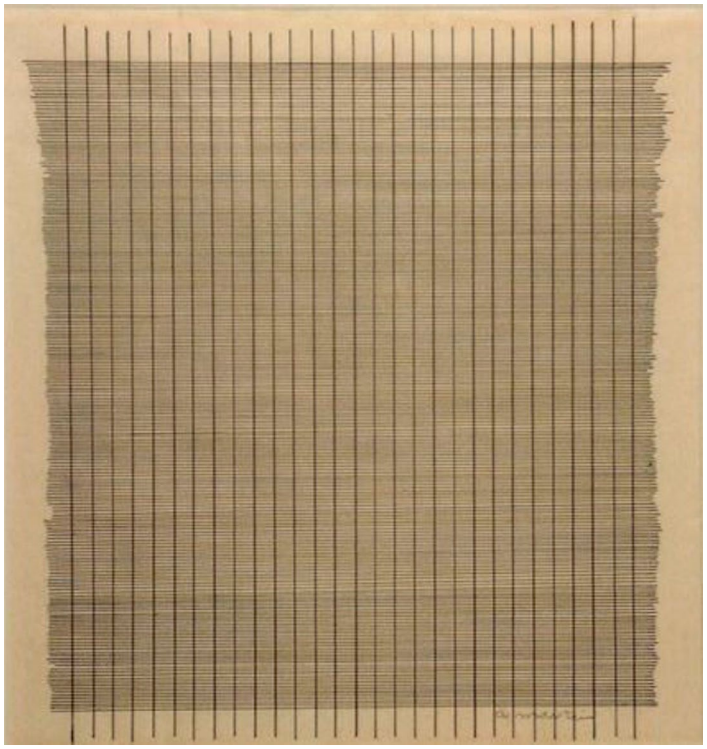

Fig. 146, Agnes Martin, Untitled, 1960, ink on paper
After *Agnes Martin*, Tate Publications, 2015, p.115

> ever-receding goal – and its emphasis on innovation and novelty for its own sake. In place of the competitiveness and ego assertion of romanticism, from which the avant-garde had borrowed so many of its attitudes, Reinhardt proposed a concept of art as a kind of discipline closer to Eastern ideals.[97]

Martin similarly says of her paintings:

> 'I would like my work to be recognised as being in the classical tradition (Coptic, Egyptian, Greek, Chinese), as representing the Ideal in the mind. Classical art cannot possibly be eclectic. One must see the Ideal in one's own mind. It is like a memory of perfection.'[98]

6. 3. 3 *Reception, attention, and 'consciousness art'*

After editing the trilogy of the selected works of Coomaraswamy, published in the Bollingen Series,[99] Roger Lipsey turned to his own study in *An Art of our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth*

97 Rose (ed.), 1991, p. 45

98 Martin, 1991, p. 19

99 Roger Lipsey (ed.), *Coomaraswamy 1: Selected Papers on Traditional Art and Symbolism*; *Coomaraswamy 2: Selected Papers on Metaphysics; Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, Princeton University Press, 1977

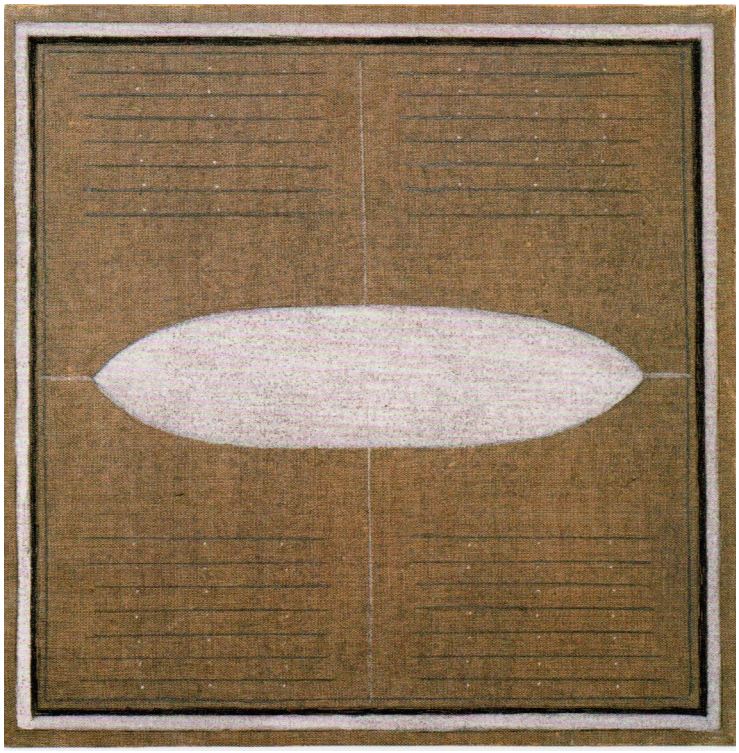

Fig. 147, Agnes Martin, Brown Composition, 1961
After *Agnes Martin*, Tate Publications, 2015, p. 71

Century Art.[100] He describes how during the writing of his book, he attended an exhibition called 'The Spiritual in Abstract Art: 1895 – 1985', which he found 'oddly disappointing', until, he says,

> In what seemed a deliberate culmination, the curators ended the long suite of works with a 'Black Painting' by Ad Reinhardt and a dark late work by Mark Rothko – side by side as if to convey a conclusive common message. …One responded to their simplicity and quietness by becoming like them. One sensed the truth of the dark sign that each was, as if all things emerge from this sort of quiescence and return to it. Malevich's Black Square was reborn, with the spiritual expressiveness that he long ago intuited in it.[101]

This idea of 'simplicity and quietness' is also expressed by Martin: 'My interest is in experience that is wordless and silent, and in the fact that this experience can be expressed for me in art work that is also still and silent.'[102] She saw both the act and object of painting as 'contemplative, solitary disciplines of perceptual experience.'[103] The subtlety of this perceptual experience is described in an essay on Martin by Simon Morley:

100 Lipsey, 1997
101 Lipsey, 1997, p. 326
102 Martin, 1991, p. 89
103 Lawrence Alloway, *Systemic Painting*, Guggenheim Publications, New York, 1966, p. 291

> The square canvas now seems to be a kind of loose and expanding container for vague, indeterminate, virtual space, and this generates the visual sensation of nebulous illumination and depth. The optics of this stage involve the viewer in a more elusive kind of seeing. There is low visual contrast and differentiation, and discrete boundaries soften or cede to an undifferentiated continuum. We feel open and absorbed into an ambient field, or that we are encountering a semi-transparent membrane.[104]

An essay by Yvonne Rand describes how the experience of spending an hour sitting in front of an Agnes Martin painting changed the way she perceived the world outside – both immediately, but also in flashes of insight in the following months:

> The beauty of the evening sky elicited joy, and I knew that my seeing of that evening sky was a seeing directly made possible by my time seeing the Martin painting. In the months since that September afternoon, moments recur of clear, expanded, vivid awareness of pearly white, modulated light on and through clouds.[105]

Having travelled to see the painting in the house of its owner, Rand spent over an hour in its contemplation. She writes of the experience: 'Being able to sit in front of a painting for one hour, her work dropped into my physical body and consciousness profoundly.'[106] The paintings of Martin and Reinhardt demand time and attention. Thomas Merton says of the small black painting of Reinhardt's that lived with him in his hermitage at Gethsemani:

> It has the following noble features, namely its refusal to have anything to do with anything else around it, notably the furniture etc. It is a most excellent small painting. It thinks that only one thing is necessary and this is true, but this one thing is by no means apparent to one who will not take the trouble to look. It is a most religious, devout, and latreutic small painting.[107]

This demand for the active – or maybe, more accurately, the inactive – participation of the viewer is also echoed by Munroe: 'Reinhardt shifted the conception of seeing from an optical event to a phenomenological process and made durational time (of looking at the painting) a medium of ontological awareness.'[108] Barbara Rose claims that Reinhardt's black paintings

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104 Morley, 2016, p. 4

105 Yvonne Rand, 'On seeing Untitled #3: bands of white and graphite', in Lawrence Rinder (ed.), *Searchlight: consciousness at the millennium,* San Francisco, 1999, p. 109

106 Rand, in Rinder (ed.), 1999, p. 113

107 Lipsey, 2006, p. 20

108 Munroe, 2009, p. 287

Fig. 148, Agnes Martin, White Flower, 1960, Oil on canvas
After *Agnes Martin*, Tate Publications, 2015, p. 84

equally demand 'not merely a different order of perception but inducing a *qualitatively different state of consciousness* from normal consciousness.'[109]

> The black paintings create perceptual demands radically different from those of Western painting. Because the cruciform image requires time to focus, and requires an act of focusing so demanding that it changes the state of the viewer's consciousness, the black paintings reflect some of the values of the Eastern cultures Reinhardt became progressively involved with as his revulsion with the function of art in the West grew. …The black paintings, although not specifically 'religious', are an effort to retrieve the dimension of the spiritual in a secular culture determined to reduce its art to the status of a commercial trading commodity. …although the black paintings can be owned by those who do not understand or care for them, they cannot be seen. They are literally invisible except to the initiated and committed viewer.[110]

Lawrence Rinder's 1999 exhibition 'Searchlight: Consciousness at the Millennium' drew attention to this possibility of artworks to both reflect and affect consciousness. In his introduction to the publication that accompanied the exhibition he says,

109 Barbara Rose, *Ad Reinhardt: Black Paintings*, Marlborough Gallery, New York, 1970, p. 19
110 Rose (ed.), 1991, p. 82

> I believe that art possesses a unique capacity to embody consciousness, and thereby heighten the viewer's awareness of his or her own consciousness…The works I am drawn to direct our attention to our attention, reminding us of the feeling of seeing, perceiving, and knowing.[111]

Providing the rationale for the exhibition, Rinder states that he is bringing together 'a wide variety of contemporary works that engender a visceral sensation of conscious experience.'[112] A few years before curating this exhibition, Rinder had encountered Jamme's collection of 'tantric abstractions' and later went on to write the introductory essay to Jamme's *Tantra Song*. Several original tantric images were featured in the 'Searchlight' exhibition.

Rinder's opening essay, written in collaboration with cognitive scientist and philosopher George Lakoff, includes a 'structure of consciousness',[113] and the exhibition divides into sections according to these categories. The first section, 'Awareness', is defined as 'the fundamental, immediate sensation of perception and cognition – a necessary precondition for conscious attention, qualia and so on.' In this section Rinder includes works by Agnes Martin, Ad Reinhardt and Robert Irwin, suggesting that 'the work of Martin and Reinhardt is not conceptual… it is pre-conceptual.'[114] He suggests that the work of these artists has the capacity to bring viewers 'an awareness of their own awareness'.[115]

Robert Irwin similarly proposed stages of conscious awareness, which he defined as beginning with *general perception* – before individual senses are separated; *direct perception* – as the immediate interface with phenomena; *conception* – where individual is differentiated from surroundings, the mind differentiates different aspects of reality but does not name them; *form* – where isolated forms are named.[116] Irwin sees each successive stage, and he lists a total of six, as a loss rather than a gain. Lawrence Weschler comments,

> It is precisely because Irwin insists that each progressive abstraction from perception to formalized truth implies a loss rather than a gain that he sees his own progressive deletions of the formalized requirements of the art object as a gain rather than a loss.[117]

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111 Lawrence Rinder (ed.), *Searchlight: consciousness at the millennium,* Thames and Hudson, London, 1999, p. 19
112 Rinder, in Rinder (ed.), 1999, p. 19
113 Lawrence Rinder and George Lakoff, 'Consciousness art: attending to the quality of experience,' in Rinder (ed.) 1999, p. 27 They define nine aspects: 'awareness, attention, qualia, unity, memory, a first-person perspective, self-awareness, conceptual framing and metaphor, and empathy'.
114 Rinder, in Rinder (ed.), 1999, p. 38
115 Rinder, in Rinder (ed.), 1999, p. 38
116 Weschler, 2008, pp. 182-183
117 Weschler, 2008, p. 184

In his article 'On Consciousness' Irwin writes, 'Every knowing will begin and must at times return here to this source, it is our root in the world.'[118] Weschler describes Irwin's 1977 Whitney retrospective as 'that progression to Point Zero, or, as he might have preferred to characterise it, to Point Infinity.'[119] Irwin claims that the ability to remain at 'point infinity' (or within Rinder's 'immediate sensation of perception') is commonly resisted and difficult to attain:

> Show us an Abstract Expressionist painting and we quickly ask: what is it? or what does it mean? Questions which in effect say: take this thing, which is right in front of me – and let me understand it, not by experiencing it, but by referencing it away from its immediate presence to whatever it is we assume it is intended to *re*-present. Making it once again into a duality of abstraction, *vis-á-vis* the singularity "it is".[120]

The ideas of both Rinder and Irwin on perception, awareness and 'embodied mind' deserve in-depth study, but were nevertheless helpful in my consideration of these illusive qualities of consciousness and perception. The work of Reinhardt and Martin makes perceptual demands. If the viewer is able to embrace these demands and remain with the work, it may be capable of returning to viewer to this state of 'singularity', this 'immediacy of perception' – the ritualistic intensity of their painting processes contributing to this absorption. Similar methods, processes and intentions are evident in the work of Robert Irwin.

6. 3. 4 *Robert Irwin: perception, reflection and the artist as researcher*

Philip Lieder, in his catalogue essay about Robert Irwin's late 'dot' paintings, writes:

> The coloration is so subdued that there is no possibility of defining what one sees in terms of it, but rather in terms of what it suggests: a quality, an energy, one feels, which will tend, ultimately, to dissolve itself uniformly on the picture plane in a kind of entropic dissipation. …what Irwin manifestly wishes to do is to *slow the viewer down*, to prepare him, in effect, for an encounter.[121]

Citing the lineage of Mondrian and Malevich, Irwin worked his way through representation and abstraction, and became a member of L.A.'s 'Post-Abstract Expressionist' community before

118 Robert Irwin, 'On Consciousness', 18th November 1974, in *Notes Toward a Conditional Art,* J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2017, p. 70

119 Weschler, 2008, p. 184

120 Irwin, 2017, p. 285

121 Paul Lieder, catalogue essay for Irwin's 1966 show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, quoted in Weschler, 2008, p.94

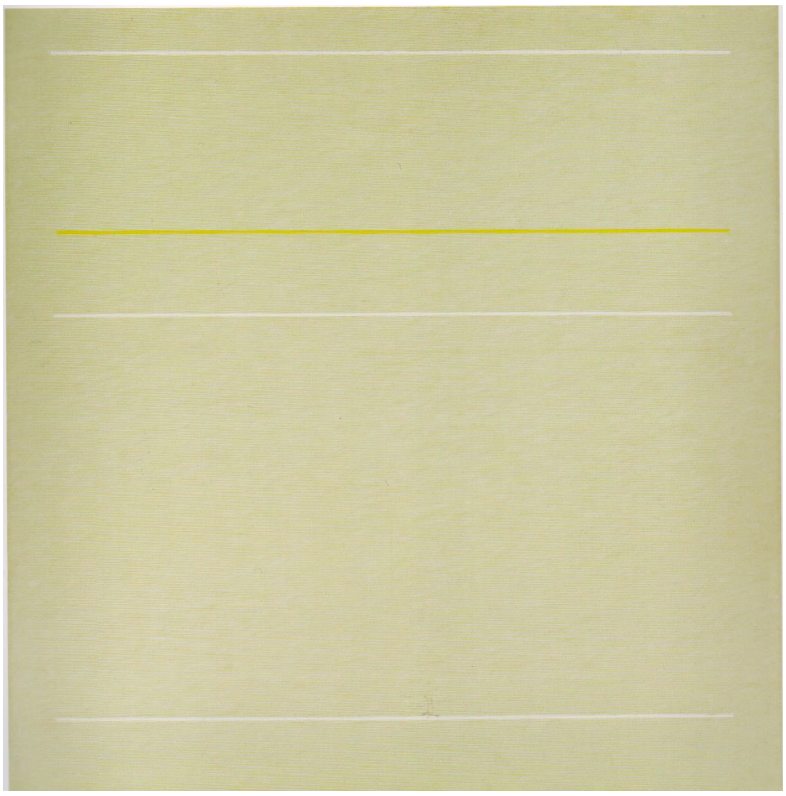

Fig. 149, Robert Irwin, Band in Boston, 1962
After *Robert Irwin: All the Rules will Change*, p. 72

arriving at his more minimal works.[122] He completed his 'early lines' series of paintings in 1962, the year that Reinhardt exhibited in L.A. for the first time, and also lectured at Pasadena Art Museum.[123] Evelyn Hankins remarks, 'It is obvious why Reinhardt would be so significant to Irwin: the elder artist delineated a disciplined process of reduction that paralleled that in which Irwin was immersed at that very moment.'[124] After this encounter with Reinhardt, Irwin began the series of 10 paintings known as his 'late lines', which he describes as 'my most serious attempt not to paint a painting'.[125] In conversation with Lawrence Weschler he explains, 'I embarked on two years of painting those paintings, two lines on each canvas, and at the end of two years there were ten of them. So, I painted a total of twenty lines over a period of two years of very, very intense activity. …All my activities after those line paintings are the result of how those paintings made me look at the world.'[126] Irwin stresses the experiential nature of these works:

122 Weschler, 2008, p. 230

123 Evelyn C. Hankins, 'Experiencing the Ineffable', in Evelyn C. Hankins (ed.), *Robert Irwin, All the Rules Will Change*, Prestel Verlag, 2016, p. 23

124 Hankins, in Hankins (ed.), 2016, P. 24. (From private conversations between Hankins and Irwin.)

125 Hankins, in Hankins (ed.), 2016, p. 25

126 Weschler, 2008, p. 73, p. 83

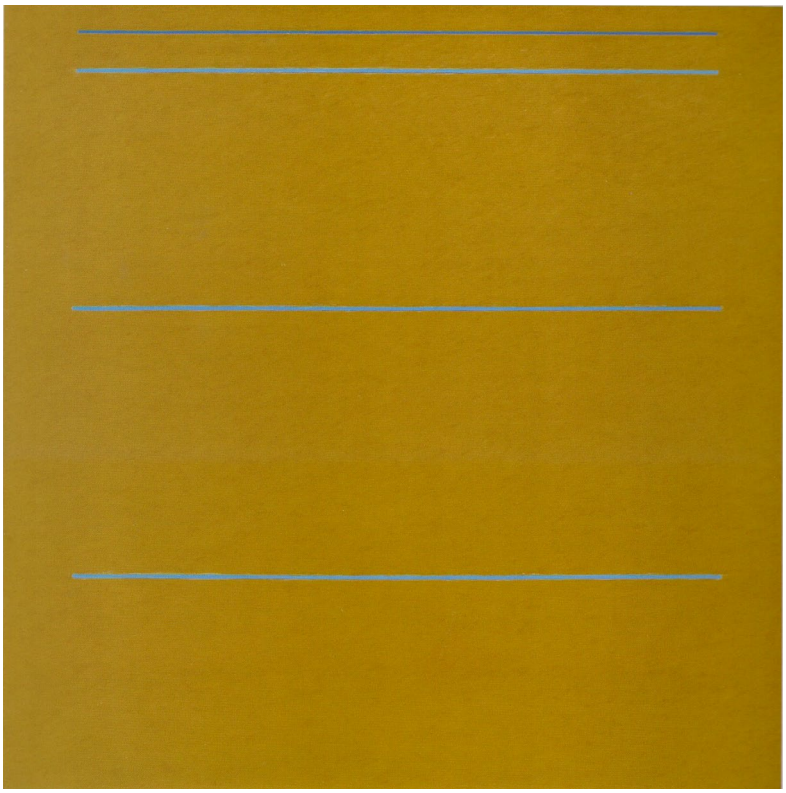

Fig. 150, Robert Irwin, Crazy Otto, 1962,
After *Robert Irwin: All the Rules will Change*, p. 74

> The lines were spaced such that your eye could not really ever read the two lines simultaneously, nor ever get involved with the kind of compositional thing. In fact, your eye tends to become caught up in a sort of negative space. …when you stop giving them a literate or articulate read, and instead look at them perceptually, you find that your eye ends up suspended in midair, midspace or midstride: time and space seem to blend in the continuum of your presence. You lose your bearings for a moment. You finally end up in a totally meditative state.'[127]

Irwin described his work as 'physical/neurological/actual as opposed to imaginary/ psychological/ metaphysical' stating, 'I could maximize the energy or the physicality of the situation and minimize the identity or idea or imagery of the situation. Which in turn allows me to reiterate that I was not pursuing an intellectual issue here but rather a perceptual one.'[128] Insisting on the essentially experiential quality of his work, he says, 'My art has never been about ideas. My pieces were never meant to be dealt with intellectually as ideas, but to be considered experientially.'[129] While the paintings became increasingly minimal, Irwin insisted on the hand-drawn:

127 Weschler, 2008, p. 79
128 Weschler, 2008, p. 94
129 Hankins, in Hankins (ed.), 2016, p. 59

> The lines …were always put on by hand, never mechanically – and that was important. …Preserving all the nuances of the hand-drawn line without, if possible, ever becoming overt about it. I could have moved to a mechanical basis, which a lot of people at that time were beginning to do, for example in so-called hard-edge painting. …The reductiveness is much more oriental or humanistic, in the sense that human presence is very much insisted upon.[130]

This idea of the physical/neurological/actual perfectly reflects my experience of working with the images of *tantra, w*hich are not in the realm of the imaginary or psychological, and maybe not even the metaphysical, but the actual. They relate to that original state of awareness, the perceptual awareness that exists before moving into meaning-making. Their effect is most definitely physical, neurological and actual. Irwin's insistence on the hand-made/hand-drawn line echoes the work of both Reinhardt and Martin, as well as that of Mondrian and Malevich, and again reflects my learning through engagement with making – particularly of the *yantra*, which while based on a geometry that demanded accuracy, became lifeless when made mechanically. It demanded that 'human presence' which Irwin insisted upon.

Irwin's conversations and writings provide an exemplary account of artist as researcher. He refers to Mondrian's statement, 'I don't want pictures, I just want to find things out.'[131] He describes a sensation of heightened perception after working so closely with his painted lines, a bodily sensation when, after weeks of experimentation, the placement of a line is just right, and the work is finished. Irwin suggests 'a series of laws of spatial composition as binding within the world of painting as the laws of physics are for the larger universe.'[132] Comparing this kind of investigation to that of the scientist, he states, 'The critical difference is that the artist measures from his intuition, his feeling. He uses himself as a measure.'[133]

After completing his 'late lines', he worked with NASA scientist Ed Wortz exploring the effects on perception of confinement in a sensory-depravation (anechoic) chamber.[134] He states: 'What the anechoic chamber was helping us to see was the extreme complexity and richness of our sense mechanism and how little of it we use most of the time.'[135] Soon after his interactions with Wortz, Irwin's work moved off the wall, into his site specific scrims. His later work involved

130 Weschler, 2008, p 78

131 Hankins, in Hankins (ed.), 2016, p. 23

132 Weschler, 2008, p. 58

133 Weschler, 2008, p. 138

134 This was part of an Art and Technology project sponsored by Los Angeles County Museum of Modern Art. Wortz was looking into the effects of sensory deprivation on astronauts during space travel. Weschler, 2008, pp. 129-134

135 Weschler, 2008, p. 134

interventions into public spaces – 'site conditioned pieces' in town centres, airports, museums. Sometimes he designed the whole project, sometimes just a carefully placed piece on a window. He remained staunchly against art as a tradable commodity and, like Reinhardt, made his living at this time through teaching. Weschler observes, 'When all the non-essentials had been stripped away [Irwin] came to the core assertion that aesthetic perception itself was the pure subject of art. Art existed not in objects but in a way of seeing.'[136] Irwin states, 'To be an artist is not a matter of making paintings or objects at all. What we are really dealing with is our state of consciousness and the shape of our perception.'[137] He comments to Weschler, 'All I try to do for people is to re-invoke the sheer wonder that they perceive anything at all.'[138]

6. 3. 5 *'Nature in her manner of operation'*

John Cage, whose sound pieces bring attention to silence, promoting an awareness of awareness, and an immediacy of perception, is often cited as introducing Zen to the New York art scene in the 1950s and 60s, but his own influences were more eclectic. In his personal memoirs he writes that having arrived at a point in his career where he stopped composing and questioned his direction, he came across the Indian singer and tabla player Gita Sarabhai, who told him, 'The purpose of music is to sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences.' Cage continues, 'I also found in the writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy that the responsibility of the artist is to imitate nature in her manner of operation. I became less disturbed and went back to work.'[139]

In his *Transformation of Nature in Art*, Coomaraswamy references the writings of Thomas Aquinas and applies this to Asian art, 'We shall find that Asiatic art is ideal in the mathematical sense: like Nature (*natura naturans*) not in appearance (viz. that of *ens natura*) but in operation.'[140] Cage adopted this phrase and frequently used it in relation to his work. The centennial exhibition of Cage's visual work (watercolours and musical scores) at the National Academy used the epigraph: 'The function of art is not to communicate one's personal ideas or feelings, but rather to imitate nature in her manner of operation.'[141]

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136 Weschler, 2008, p. 190

137 Robert Irwin, *Notes Toward a Conditional Art*… The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2017, p. 49

138 Weschler, 2008, p. 206

139 John Cage Personal Library: www.johncagelibrary.cfm *Ars imitatur naturum in sua operatione*: art imitates nature in its workings (Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologieo (ST), 1a 117) is the translation used by Coomaraswamy and later by Cage, 'art is the imitation of nature in her manner of operation'.

140 Coomaraswamy, 2016 (1935), p. 11

141 Exhibition Review, *Politico*, 'The stunning chance-made visual art of John Cage gets its centennial due'.

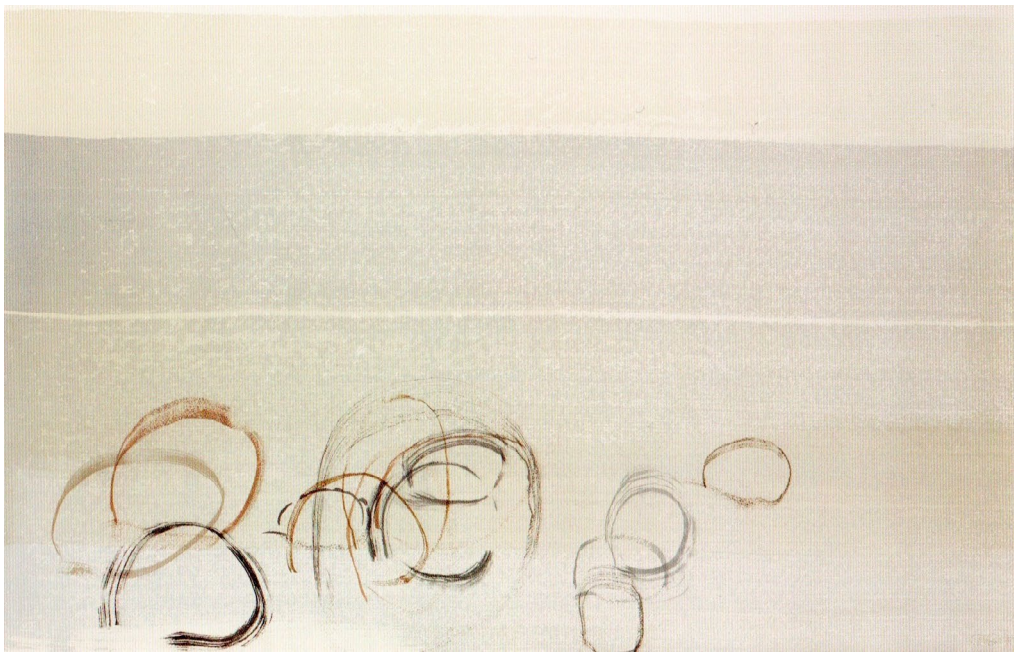

Fig. 151, John Cage, New River Watercolours, Series IV, No. 7, 1988
After *Every Day is a Good Day: The Visual Art of John Cage*,
Hayward Publishing, London, 2010 p. 129

Before appreciating its lineage through Coomaraswamy to Aquinas, I was drawn to Cage's use of this phrase. In his later series of prints and watercolours he allows the materials to act "as nature would act", and eliminates personal preference by using what he calls chance mechanisms to decide the placement of elements of design. He frequently refers to his use of the Chinese oracular classic the *Yi Jing* (*I Ching, Book of Changes*) to obtain these 'chance operations' in his musical scores, water colours and prints.[142] But the *Book of Changes* is not so much about chance as a way to determine 'what is' and the way that things and events move and change.[143] Closer, in fact, to 'nature in her manner of operation'. Cage refers to the interactions of its 64 hexagrams as 'a rather basic life-mechanism', likening this to the possible mechanisms of DNA.[144] Calvin Tomkins says of Cage's use of 'chance', 'In place of an art created by the imagination, skill and taste of the individual artist, Cage espoused an art of chance, in which every effort would be made to extinguish the artist's personality, his memory, and his desires.'[145] Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Cage was removing personal choice and prejudice by using the methods of the *Yi Jing* and rather than chance, he was giving expression to the natural processes of life.

142 John Cage: *Every Day is a Good Day: The Visual Art of John Cage*, Hayward Publishing, London, 2010

143 The Chinese character *yi* (易) meaning both change and an idea of ease. As seen, for example, in the Kroll Classical Chinese Dictionary.

144 Cage, 2010, p.71

145 Calvin Tompkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time*, Penguin, New York, 1980 p. 68

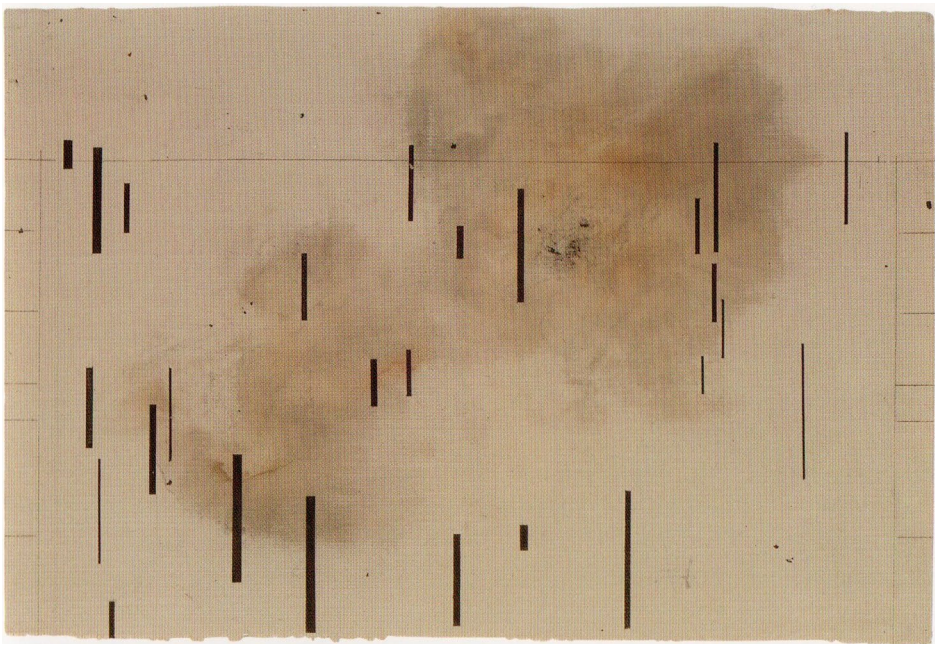

Fig. 152, John Cage, 'Global Village 37-48', acquatint on grey smoked paper, 1989
After *Every Day is a Good Day: The Visual Art of John Cage*,
Hayward Publishing, London, 2010 p. 133

His 'New River Watercolours' series (fig. 151) used stones he collected from the New River in Virginia, which are unusually round due to the action of the water and their specific geological makeup. I was reminded of Mishra's description of *śaligrāma* stones formed in the Gandaki river in Nepal, where the action of the water and the underlying geology combined to create these unique artifacts.[146] Cage placed the stones using various chance methods, which also reflected his previous work inspired by the Ryoanji rock garden in Kyoto. Cage followed his New River Watercolours with several series of works on paper incorporating marks made by fire and smoke. What might be seen as random patterns are in fact are governed by a complex interaction of mathematical laws and 'chance' operations (fig. 152) and in Cage's visual work, it is this combination of the unseen order and apparent disorder which provides an exciting visual tension. It is interesting to consider these works and their making in comparison with Irwin's labourious late lines and his insistence on 'using himself as a measure'. Both artists, in different ways, are attempting to 'bring our awareness to our own awareness'.

Hans (Jean) Arp similarly used "chance operations" in his work, insisting that he was not concerned with accessing the sub-conscious, as became popular amongst his fellow surrealists, but an interest in 'objects formed by natural processes'.[147] In discussing the work of Arp, Giedion-Welcker suggests that, 'He evolves structures of a fluid order, in which the elements are disposed

146 See pp. 50, 126

147 Robert Melville, 'On Some of Arp's Reliefs', in James Thrall Soby (ed.), *Arp*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1958, p. 28

according to 'the laws of chance'.[148] Referring to his 'Constellations', as he often called his pieces, Arp says that the law of chance 'embraces all laws and is unfathomable like the first cause from which all life arises'.[149] He states in his *Art Concret* manifesto,

> We don't want to copy nature. We don't want to reproduce. We want to produce like a plant produces fruit, and not reproduce. …Works of art should not be signed by the artists. These paintings, these sculptures – these objects – should remain anonymous in the huge studio of nature, like clouds, mountains, seas. …These works are constructed with lines, surfaces, forms and colours that try to go beyond the human and attain the infinite and the eternal.[150]

In the early 1930s Arp was a founder member of the *Abstraction-Création* group, which included 'a variety of non-figurative trends'.[151] Explaining the group's title, Karl Ruhrberg states, 'Abstraction refers to the progressive reduction of the mimesis of nature. Création refers to an elementary geometric order that is not derived from nature.'[152] The ideas of the group were taken further by ex-Bauhaus student, architect, painter and sculptor Max Bill who promoted an art free of artifice, and declared in his *Art Concrêt* manifesto that, 'Art can transmit thought in such a way as to make it directly perceptible. …All art is concrete which uses its materials functionally and not symbolically,'.[153] This takes us back to Coomaraswamy's statement concerning the use of materials in Indian art, where 'paint remains paint, stone remains stone'. Throughout the practical research, I became increasingly aware of the functional use of materials, and in working with *śaligrāma* I allowed the materials to act in a way that I did not control, but which emerged from the inherent properties of the materials.

Reflections

I began this part of the research looking for eastern influences within the work of these artists, and while an awareness of eastern thinking is undoubtedly there, I no longer consider it to be an "influence", but rather a recognition. While the growing familiarity with eastern philosophies no doubt provided both a context and a language to discuss the new works, I come away feeling

148 Carola Giedion-Welcker, 'Arp: An Appreciation', in Thrall Soby (ed.), 1958, p. 22 (See, for example, Arp's 1915 *Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance*, MOMA.)

149 Robert Melville, in Thrall Sobey, 1958, p. 33

150 Alex Danchev, *100 Artist's Manifestos: From the Futurists to the Stuckists*, p. 303

151 Ruhrberg, Schneckenburger, Fricke, Honnef, *Art of the 20th Century*, Taschen, Köln, 2000, p. 456

152 A statement which could possibly be used to define the early work of Mondrian (abstraction) and Malevich (creation). It is interesting to note that Mondrian exhibited several works in the 1941 *Abstraction Creation* exhibition in Paris.

153 Max Bill, *Art Concrêt Manifesto* (1947), Statements of Modern Art,

confident that these western artists reached their conclusions through their practice. They made their discoveries through their work, and found resonances within eastern practice.

Throughout the research process, I experienced unexpected connections between the work of these western abstractionists and my discoveries through the traditional arts; a similar feeing of timelessness, continuity. I was fascinated to discover similarities in the making processes – the ritual of methods, the insistence on the hand-drawn, the concern with perfections and imperfections. And while these methods may apply more widely to painting practice, the work discussed in this chapter shares the concerns of traditional practices to remove the personal and look towards the universal. It rejects romantic notions of self-expression, while exploring line, surface, materials and the liminality between form and formlessness. It shares with the non-figurative work of the Hindu traditions the use of horizontals and verticals and simple geometries to evoke a sense of space or non-space. It attempts to approach the formless, evoking a dimension that is changeless, between the known and unknown. While radical in its expression, the work is actually looking back to the timeless ideas of the traditional arts, and finds resonances within both the classical geometry of Indian art and the abstractions of tantrism. These ideas are further explored in the final chapter.

Chapter 7

Concluding reflections

Purer and emptier, more absolute and more exclusive
– non-objective, non-representational, non-figurative,
non-imagist, non-expressionist, non-subjective...

Ad Reinhardt

Fig. 152, Kazimir Malevich, White Suprematist Cross, 1920.
After *Malevich*, Tate Publications, 2014, p. 171

7. 1 *Introduction*

While this written submission has inevitably been presented in a series of chapters, each covering an area of the research, the process was one of fluidity, over-lapping and integration. I read of Mondrian's interest in the writings of Schoenmaekers, and his ideas on horizontals and verticals while creating the geometry of the *yantra,* and found his thoughts reflected in my growing understanding of the liturgy behind the heavenly and earthly threads of the *yantra*. As I was making my own discoveries of imperfection and the hand-made through working with the imagery of the *Sādanamālā*, I read of Martin and Reinhart's preoccupation with the hand-drawn, Martin's writings on the struggle for perfection and its inevitable failure. While reading Khanna's thesis and absorbed in the poetry of the *Kāmakalā-vilāsa*, I contemplated the blackness of Reinhardt, explored the different qualities of black pigments while painting the Śiva *liṅga,* and considered the relevance of modern physics to my growing obsession with blackness.

I also found that as the research progressed, it became more difficult to put words to my discoveries. The more I worked with the imagery, the more it seemed to demand awareness and silence. I was increasingly drawn to the simplest imagery, but always there was a degree of complexity within that simplicity – a complexity which often seemed to reflect a tension within my mind between perfection and imperfection, the personal and the universal. As I began to understand that the *yantra* has a specific, defined, ritualistic purpose in guiding towards the formless Absolute, and the small tantric abstractions a function in an internally focused meditation practice, I found that I was more appreciative of these attributes within the paintings of Martin and Reinhardt – a stilling, centering, meditative quality that demanded attention and concentration. These western abstractionists seem to have been striving to create a new, non-aligned approach to the formless, quietening the mind, insisting that we remain in the present. It was this experiential connection between the traditional and modern imagery which also became the measure of success for my own work.

By working with the tantric imagery, I was able to understand these effects more clearly, identifying certain aspects of the making which influenced the effect of the work. This included the agency of materials, ritualistic practice, the insistence on the hand-made; spatial awareness and alignment; blackness, networks and vibrations; a balance of control and chance, perfections and imperfections. These thoughts and reflections are addressed more fully in this final chapter.

7. 2 Materiality, ritual and participation

The initial engagement with the traditional arts drew my attention to the materials themselves, and to the ritualistic processes involved in their preparation. This was no longer a simple concern for colour, or even its symbolism, but its actuality, the physicality of the medium. This relationship to the physical properties of materials intensified as I worked with primal elements and observed their interactions; from the concept of 'chaos' within the icon, to an expression of primordial matter within the studies of *hiraṇyagarbha*, primordial landscapes and "icons of abstraction", and with the idea of allowing 'nature to act' within the *śaligrāma.* This in turn led to a reconsideration of the idea of 'chance' and randomness, as these seemingly unpredictable patternings follow the basic laws of physics and chemistry, thoughts which referred back to Arp's suggestion that the law of chance 'embraces all laws and is unfathomable like the first cause from which all life arises'.[1]

The ritualistic, while inherently practical, processes involved in the preparation of materials for the making of traditional sacred art instil a contemplative state, a slowing down. When making the *yantra*, this is furthered through the painting process and the ritual act of entering a sacred space, circumnavigating the central point of inter-dimensionality. The process of making allowed a deeper understanding that these are functional ritual objects, tools to be used, not to be interpreted but experienced. That an image is "performative" suggests that it has real effects in the world, effects which might be labeled as "magic" – a term that has been frequently associated with *yantra*. Within this context, Ramachandra Rao explains that magic is simply the practical application of religion, just as technology may be seen as the practical application of science.[2] André Padoux observes that in Sanskrit there is no term for magic, and that in a world that is not 'disenchanted', deities are omnipresent and supernatural actions and powers are an aspect of everyday reality.[3]

Maybe it is this idea of enchantment and dis-enchantment in relation to an artifact that defines its ability to function. Art theorist and philosopher Byung-Chul Han laments the disappearance of magic and enchantment, claiming that they are the true source of art.[4] Similarly, in her article, 'Reclaiming Animism', philosopher and art critic Isabelle Stengers suggests, 'We are heirs of an operation of social and cultural eradication… So many of our words – like animism and magic – must be reclaimed.'[5] This possibility of enchantment in relation to art seems to reflect the need for

1 Robert Melville, in Thrall Sobey, 1958, p. 33 (also p. 178)

2 S. K. Ramachandra Rao, *The Yantras,* Indian Books Centre, Delhi, 1988, p. 2. Rao's use of 'technology' echoes Bill Witherspoon's 'Art as Technology', and the 'functional' nature of his *yantra* in the Oregon desert.

3 Padoux, 2017, p. 67

4 Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals*, Polity, Cambridge, 2020, p. 24

5 Isabel Stengers, Jamie Sutcliffe (ed.), *Magic: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, London, 2021, p. 42

participation, the ability to identify in some way with the art object, the willingness to be enchanted. Magic and enchantment may be considered as the performative and participative quality of the art object, more obviously in the work of ritual art, but also in any work of art which is intended to affect consciousness. In her writings on the Orthodox Christian icon, Cornelia Tsakiridou, states:

> For Orthodox theology, the experience of vision that surpasses reason and conceptualization has always been the way *par excellence* of approaching divine things, not in the sense that we understand them, since they lie beyond understanding, but in the sense that we *participate* in them.

Tsakiridou's sense of participation as a way of knowing suggests a two-way exchange between artwork and viewer, which is dependent on the viewer's ability to receive. This is reminiscent of Coomaraswamy's 'unification of seer, seeing and seen, of knower, knowing and known', which he describes as 'immediate assimilation'.[6] This immediacy of assimilation reflects back to Tsakiridou's statement: 'Images move in-between the boundaries of perception and intellection.'[7]

The work of art is an immediate experience, a participatory process. Maybe it is this act of participation that allows the re-enchantment of art, an acknowledgement of the performance of the image. As Lawrence Rinder reminds us, 'It is crucial to appreciate this acting, this *work* that the art is doing.'[8] Tantric art is ritual art, art that has a purpose, a function, a work to do. But this performance of the image can potentially apply to all works of art, and as Rinder suggests, might even define what is the 'work' of art. The engagement with the art of *tantra* allowed this performative aspect of art to be fully recognized and its mechanisms explicit.

7. 3 Spatiality, horizontals and verticals

My initial work with *yantra* brought attention to the concept of the image as a place/space to be entered. The construction around the horizontal and vertical axis, the awareness of orientation to the four directions, the attempt to align that to bodily posture, all instilled the sense of ritual within the making process. The heavenly and earthly threads, which hold its construction, provide the central crossing point (*tīrtha*), the central seat of the deity, where heavenly and earthly dimensions intersect. A sense of meaning comes through the physical engagement, partly from the haptic precision of the geometry, but even more from this sense of spatial awareness. While Timalsina describes a circumnavigation of the *yantra* as a kind of *'aide memoire'*,[9] an effective way to remember the various deities and their attributes as they circle

6 Coomaraswamy, 2016 (1935) p. 12

7 Tsakiridou, 2013, p. 64

8 Lawrence Rinder, *Art Life: Selected Writings 1991-2005*, Gregory R. Miller and Co., New York, 2005, p. 4

9 Timalsina, 2017, p. 22

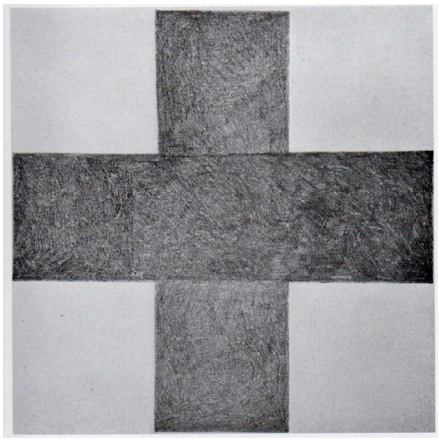

Fig. 153, Kazimir Malevich,
Second Suprematist Element, 1913
After, *The Non-Objective World*, 2003, p. 109

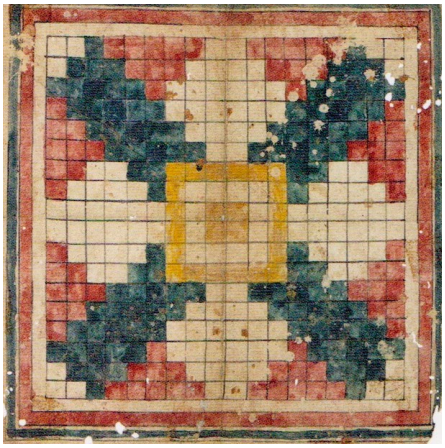

Fig. 154, *Sarvatobhadra*, 18th-19th c.
Collection of Joost van den Bergh

the central point, it seems that all that is required is quiet attention for the image to reveal itself and to exert its effect. Working with *yantra* is a training course in paying attention, in allowing information to be received directly through the senses. And while I also engaged in reading the texts, these began to feel limiting when compared to the experiential immersion required for the making. The more I worked with these images, the more I understood the textual explanation as a secondary source – the image as primary. I am reminded of Jamme's statement when asked about the origins of his small tantric abstractions, 'We would have to know if the text was a commentary on the images, or the images illustrations of the text.'[10]

While I have been familiar with the western imagery considered here for many years, the spatial awareness discovered through the making of *yantra* transferred to the works of Mondrian and Martin, horizontals and verticals were understood differently within the body. The 'sensitivity training' gained through working with *yantra* added a new dimension to my experience of these images. The early horizontals and verticals of Mondrian, particularly the succession of studies which culminated in his breakthrough Pier and Ocean painting of 1915 (Composition 10 in Black and White), were a gradual and methodological distillation of elements until only the essentials remained. The lines within the final painting hover within the space of their containing ovoid. They are roughly drawn, and seem to be in motion, shimmering, maybe, in the same way that Martin's grids vibrate in and through the surface. Whereas the early Mondrian works still evoke space and depth, both Martin and Reinhardt used their verticals and horizontals to negate pictorial space. And while the surface might appear to have depth, it is not a representational depth, more a sensation of being drawn further into the experience of uniformity. There is no place for the eye to settle, we are not led around the surface or even to its centre, but stretched, expanded, in an overall sameness. This is what seems to provide that sense of stillness. Martin's

10 Franck André Jamme, *Field of Colour*, (Drawing Papers 50), The Drawing Centre, New York, 2004, p. 9

grids are complex, vibratory, diffusing, while Reinhardt's simple 3 x 3 division of the canvas creates a centering stability. Both demand still attention.

While Mondrian refers to Schoenmaekers and a Platonic understanding of the 'inner construction of reality,'[11] this reference to horizontals and verticals, heavenly and earthly threads, seems to be a universal language. These ideas are made clear within the traditions, but they are also understood subliminally, through the spatial awareness of the body. We recognise the language as a part of our human experience. Alluding to this possibility, Jamme says of his collections, 'Either these images are ageless, or there is something in the spirit of man that is common to all.'[12]

7. 4 Perfection, imperfection, perception

Working with the *śrīyantra* brought a different kind of learning and attention, the need for precision and perfection as the relationships and interconnections slowly emerged through the careful navigation of the geometry. The meetings are so tenuous, the whole structure seemingly impossible, until the central triangle emerges, independent of its surroundings, with the compass-point *bindu* dead centre. But I found that this need for perfection was contrasted with an attraction to the imperfect, to the hand-made. In the making of the final two *yantra* (figs. 67 and 68) I followed the inconsistencies in the *Sādanamālā* manuscript itself, resisting the temptation of geometric perfection, and working with the "imperfections" of the original. It was these imperfect images which drew my attention. They were more vibrant, more approachable, and the experience of working in this way provided a different appreciation of the internal tensions of surfaces and points of intersection. The painting process drew attention to surface tensions, meetings and spaces between. I found that there was perfection where it mattered most – a possibly deliberate dynamism of movement in the inconsistencies.

This process drew my attention to the fact that Malevich's squares are never quite square, his horizontals and verticals always slightly off-centre, and this gives the images their dynamic tension. I found while working with *yantra* that I was constantly drawn back to one simple, roughly drawn *śrīyantra* (fig. 155) from the collections of van den Bergh. It has vitality. The hand seems to be that of a devotee, the *yantra* drawn with intimacy and affection. It is not geometrically perfect, but there seems to be a connection between the intention of the practitioner and that of the *yantra*; a unity between the two. The struggle of the human hand to understand and convey its essence is somehow transmitted through the image. A sincerity of intention maybe. Agnes Martin suggests that while the artist will never achieve perfection itself, she may achieve the

11 Veen, 2017, p. 25

12 Jamme, 2004, p. 8

Fig. 155, *Śrīyantra*
from the collections of Joost van den Bergh

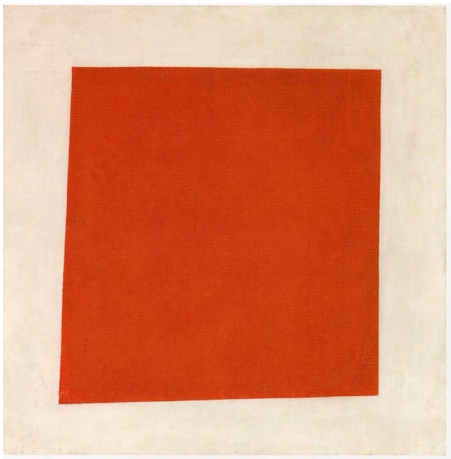

Fig. 156, Kazimir Malevich, Red Square, 1915,
After *Malevich*, Tate Publications, 2014, p. 104

'renewal of moments of perfection'.[13] But she cautions, 'We constantly pursue perfection …the danger is intellectual interference.'[14]

As I worked with the *yantra* and in the later experiments with the *liṅga* and triangle, I became absorbed in this play between striving for perfection, and inevitable failure. I began to enjoy the failures, but they could never be achieved deliberately. Even when deciding to replicate the wonkiness of the *Sādanamālā yantra,* it was not my own imperfection, I copied the lack of symmetry in the original, possibly imperfectly, just to see how it felt. When working with the *liṅga* the use of stencils created a different kind of imperfection, but again, it was not deliberate. I simply allowed the materials to act according to their inherent nature. Not a chance occurrence, but determined by the natural propensity of the materials themselves. The slight 'fraying' of the painted edge providing a sense of movement and vibration. The simple shape comes alive.

While the edge of the black ovoid gives dynamism to the image, it is the intensity of blackness that provided the most intense experience when working with the Śiva imagery. The idea that the formless nature of the Absolute should be imaged in this way provided a conceptual depth, but it was the actual experience of working with the blackness, its effect on perception, that provided a key to its significance. The image moved and changed, danced as the simple shape reacted with the space around it. Closing the eyes, the image would appear as a vibrant white luminosity, open them again, and the two images, the white and the black, vibrated together. It seemed obvious that these were intended to play with perception. The small 'tantric abstractions' often resembled the kind of images that appear before closed eyes during meditation, and working with their painting was an exercise in awareness of these perceptual effects. Not simply the dazzle of

13 Martin, 1991, p. 69
14 Princenthal, 2015, p. 107

'Op-art' – but an access to imagery that seemed somehow embedded in bodily experience. Part of the patterning of our neural systems maybe. Nothing mystical, more a training of the senses. This idea of training often came to mind while working with both the *yantra* and these small abstractions. These were different kinds of training, one in spatial orientation, concentration, focus and body-centering, the other more eye/brain, but both capable of inducing a sense of expansiveness. This also echoed Irwin's idea of a 'series of laws of spatial composition', and of using oneself as a measure.[15] It is this use of oneself as a measure that seems to be the tool of training.

7. 5 Blackness

Working with the small black ovals instilled the same feeling as standing before the blackness of a Reinhardt. I was surprised that something so small could have such a profound effect. But the experience was not about scale, but concentration and immersion. And while with Martin we might still pay attention to the line, the occasional subtle appearance of colour (maybe in a thin colour pencil line), Reinhardt has even eliminated that. His black expanses demand complete non-verbal attention. We are not allowed to move into interpretation for a second. All possible signs and signifiers have gone. And if we have the patience to remain with the work, we become absorbed in non-thinking, non-doing, non-being. 'Darkness is pure non-being,' Reinhardt wrote in his notes. 'What is left - emptiness, darkness, getting rid of.'[16]

The more I worked with the simple black ovoids and squares of the tantric abstractions, and considered both the mystery of the *liṅga* and the Reinhardt blacks, the more I wanted to remain in this blackness. Despite diverse beginnings, I was continually drawn to return to this unformed state, this deep, impenetrable black. The texts of Hinduism and Daoism celebrate the ability to remain with blackness, darkness and obscurity. I was reminded of the first chapter of Laozi's *Daode Jing* which ends with the line, 'Darkness within darkness, the gateway to all mystery'. The same Chinese character *xuan* (玄) is variously translated as 'dark', 'mysterious', 'subtle', 'obscure',[17] but always suggests the unknowable impenetrability of the *dao*. The third century CE school of Daoism, *Xuanxue* (玄學) is variously translated as *The Mystery School, The Dark Learning*, and the suggestion that the *dao* is something 'undifferentiated and impenetrable'[18] reflects a similar designation as the Śiva *liṇga* – both the most revered and sacred conceptions of reality within their traditions. Daoism advises a familiarity with darkness, an ability to sit with the mysterious and unknowable, while the Śiva devotee contemplates the blackness and emptiness of the *liṅga*, or the impenetrable *brahman*, where 'the sun shines not, nor the moon nor stars, nor do the

15 See above, p. 174

16 Munroe, 2010, p. 288

17 See for example, translations of the *Daode Jing* by Ames and Hall, Red Pine, Richard Lynn, Robert Hendricks.

18 *Laozi: Daode Jing* chapter 25

lightnings strike'.[19] Daoism celebrates the mystery of the unknown, and suggests that 'emptiness and nothingness are the dwelling place of the *dao*'.[20]

Robert Irwin observes that art seeks out truth and meaning in a way that parallels discovery in science,[21] so maybe it is appropriate for me to consider blackness and darkness at a time when both black holes and dark matter are at the heart of scientific exploration and speculation. They are our current unknowns and provide an overwhelming immensity of curiosity and possibility. Physicist and science populist Carlo Ravelli tells us that black holes are regions in space where an enormous amount of mass is packed into a tiny volume. This creates a gravitational pull so strong that not even light can escape. Inside the black hole 'matter gets squashed, but not all the way to an infinitely small point, because there is a limit to how small things can be. Quantum gravity generates a huge pressure that makes matter bounce out, precisely as a collapsing universe can bounce out into an expanding universe.'[22] Not so elegantly phrased as the description within the *Kāmakalā-vilāsa* of the concepts of emission and reabsorption through the central *bindu* point of the *śrīyantra*, but it tells a similar, or maybe the same, story. Ravelli adds, 'Seen from the 'outside' (rather than within the black hole where time is warped and may even cease to exist) this bounce back may take billions of years. …In the end, this is what a black hole is: a short cut to the distant future.'[23] It is impossible not to think of the huge timescales of Vedic *kalpas*, and consider the in and out-breath of Viṣṇu as one life cycle of Brāhma: 'With his in-breath all worlds are withdrawn.'[24]

Ravelli mentions the proposed construction of a 'network of radio antennae' which will 'achieve resolution sufficient to "see" the galactic black hole.'[25] This was realised when the Event Horizon telescope became a reality in 2019, and three years later, in 2022, the black hole at the center of earth's galaxy was photographed for the first time and widely distributed throughout the media. The 'event horizon' is the place where matter is either absorbed or ejected, its ejection seen as a bright ring of radiation. On the horizon itself, time stops.[26] This powerful flash of light, this bright ring of radiation, reflects the description of *Māhabindu* in the *Kāmakalā-vilasa:* 'The

19 *Mundaka Upaniṣad*

20 *Jing Shen, The Vital Spirits*: *A Translation of Huainanzi chapter 7*, Monkey Press, London, 2012, p. 7

21 Weschler, 2008, p. 140

22 Carlo Ravelli, *Reality is not what it seems: The Journey to Quantum Gravity,* Random House, 2016, p. 200

23 Ravelli, 2016, p. 200

24 Woodroffe, 2022, p. 29

25 Ravelli, 2016, p. 196

26 The NASA website describes the event horizon: 'This is what makes a black hole black. We can think of the event horizon as the black hole's surface. Inside this boundary, the velocity needed to escape the black hole exceeds the speed of light, which is as fast as anything can go. So whatever passes into the event horizon is doomed to stay inside it – even light. Because light can't escape, black holes themselves neither emit nor reflect it, and nothing about what happens within them can reach an outside observer.' https://science.nasa.gov/universe/black-holes/anatomy/

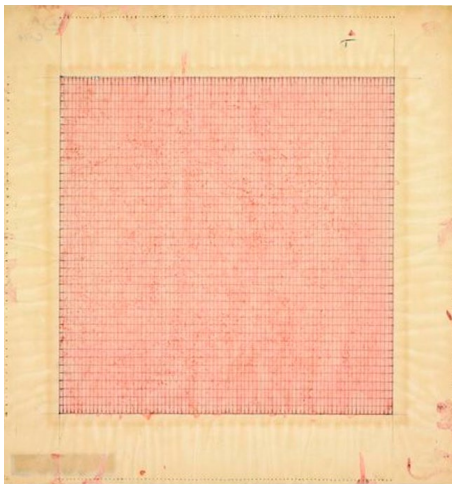

Fig. 157, Agnes Martin, Untitled, 1960
Ink on paper; After *Agnes Martin,* Tate Publications, 2015, p. 113

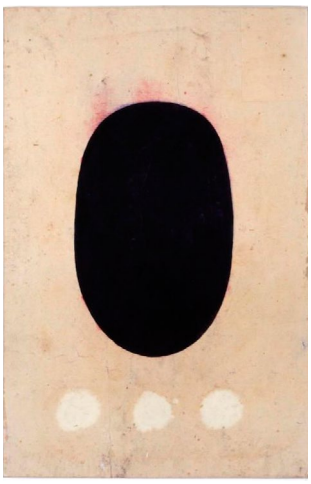

Fig . 158, Śiva liṅga, anonymous
Public domain

Māhabindu spontaneously arises as a flash of light and rests in the center of the *śrīcakra*.' Khanna adds: 'The limitless contracts into a 'dimensionless point'.[27]

While my practical work moved through the *śrīyantra* to its central dimensionless, but simultaneously interdimensional, point into the blackness of the void, these ideas all played in my mind; the vastness of space and time expressed within the Indian texts resonating with findings of modern physics, but also made real in the ovoid of the *liṅga.* The simplest of the small tantric abstractions and *śāligrāma* somehow held all this potential, this contraction of the limitless.

7. 6 Networks, vibrations and inter-dimensionality

Discussing his work on consciousness and perception with Lawrence Weschler, Irwin suggests that artists who are real inquirers cannot but be in line with the scientific research of the time. He points out that a cubist painting of the 1910s reflecting contemporary insights into four-dimensional space/time would be quite different to a work of neo-cubism painted at a later date.[28] Mondrian and Malevich made their breakthrough works at the time Einstein was writing his general theory of relativity, which revolutionized our view of reality. At the same time, Woodroffe and his teachers were busy with their first translations of tantric texts, reflecting ideas of contemporary science in their writings. Some 50 years later Irwin says of his own work, 'By the time I arrived on the scene, as a post-abstract expressionist, there is at least the possibility of looking at the world as a kind of continuum, rather than as a collection of broken-up and isolated

27 Khanna, 1989, p. 118-119 (quoting from *Kāmakalā Vilasa*, vs. 4)
28 Weschler, 2008, p. 140

events.'[29] The works of both Martin and Reinhardt seem to reflect these concepts of field theory and the networks of interconnecting systems which were seeping into popular consciousness in the 1950s and 60s. In 1966, Martin's work was included in an exhibition curated by Lawrence Alloway at the Guggenheim called 'Systemic Painting', and Jack Burnham's article on Systems Aesthetics which appeared in *Artforum* in 1968, includes the work of Reinhardt.[30]

Systems theory sees the world as a web of inter-relationship rather than as individual objects.[31] It is interested in understanding pattern and mapping relationship.[32] Martin's shimmering lines and spatial grids suggest the vibratory nature of quantum reality, 'In the world of quantum mechanics, everything vibrates, nothing stays still.'[33] Physicist Brian Greene explains: 'Each particle contains a vibrating, oscillating, dancing filament that physicists have called a "string".'[34] These ideas are reflected in Richard Davis' 'oscillating universe', and Mukhyopādhyāya's description of the coiling and uncoiling, constantly moving rhythms of nature,[35] and artist/researcher Barbara Bolt's 'interdimensional functionality'.[36] David Shulman describes this 'interdimensional functionality' when recounting his experience of visiting a Śiva temple in south India; a vision of this web of inter-relationship, the criss-crossing grid of divine/human interactions:

> So the world is thick with signs and highly specialised modes of emergence… together they form an immense, crisscrossing grid within which a person can, with a little help, navigate successfully. "Sages" are capable of seeing the wider grid and articulating the connections. Gods play with the grid, but they are also part of it, nodes within it; at the same time, they seem to enjoy a measure of plasticity denied us. The grid is so dense and saturated with determinate vectors that one might want to free oneself entirely – *mukti*, the ancient goal of release. Anything, even leaving behind the world, for a few gasps of fresh air. Divine human relations, like the links between any other two levels or entities, are heavily interdependent and interactive.[37]

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29 Weschler, 2008, p. 151

30 Jack Burnham, Systems Aesthetics, in *Artforum*, Vol 7, No 1, September 1968

31 Shantena Augusto Sabbatini, online lecture, *Quantum Physics and Taoism*, 14th July, 2021

32 Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi, *The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016, p. 4

33 Ravelli, 2016, p. 198

34 Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe,* London, Vintage Books, 2000, p. 14

35 Woodroffe, 2022, p. 76-77

36 Barbara Bolt, *Art Beyond Representation: The performative power of the image*, I. B. Taurus, London, 2004, p. 187. It is interesting to note that Bolt uses the term *methexis,* which refers to the Pythagorean idea of a performative practice carried out to unite the human and divine planes. These Pythagorean ideas are also referred to by Schoenmaekers in his theories around the horizontal, human, plane and the vertical, heavenly plane.

37 David Shulman, *Spring, Heat, Rains: A South Indian Travel Diary,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009, p. 38

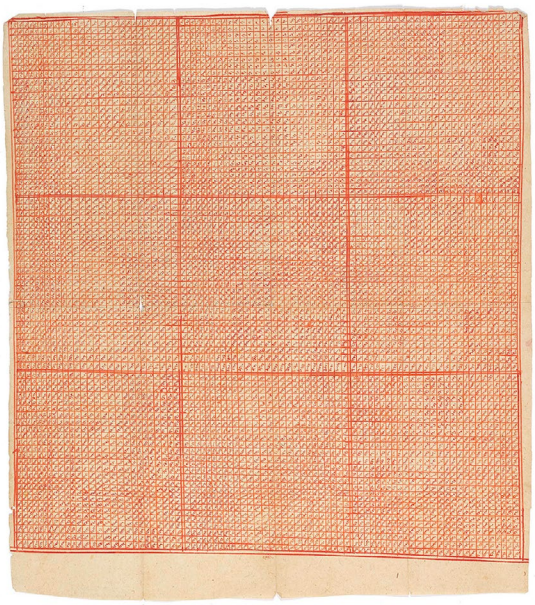


Fig . 159, Mantra Grid, 18th-19th c. Gouache on paper, collection, Joost van den Bergh

As my work moved from the potential of the void with the *liṅga* into its re-emergence into some kind of material form with *hiraṇyagarbha*, networks and grids interacted with the chance interactions of pigment. It was more a matter of 'understanding pattern and mapping relationship', the re-emergence of some kind of cosmic order, whether the underlying invisible structures, or the nature of the elements themselves. The primitive landscapes reflected division of water, air and earth, the first expression of the *tattvas* as they solidify into material form. While textual reading enlightened the process of my research, it is the poetry of Shulman and Jamme, the acuity of Kramrisch, which reflect the vastness of this Hindu vision of reality, and understand the divine play, or *līlā*, which allows this tradition to be joyful, its imagery not too serious. This vision is captured in the smallest, most playful images, suggesting that an approach to the formless may be made with humour as well as awe. Within much Indian imagery, childlike play co-exists with extreme wonder, beauty, and intense seriousness – laughing, maybe, at the vastness and incomprehensibility of it all.

Irwin suggests that there is a 'dialogue of immanence' which automatically occurs between thinkers, artists, scientists, philosophers – a dialogue of the 'passionately curious'.[38] This fascination with the cutting edge of current scientific thinking and speculation was also put forward by Mondrian: 'People do not understand why a painter should concern himself with the laws of life; they do not understand that the laws of life realize themselves perhaps most clearly in art.'[39] Maybe it is this concern with ideas that reflect our understanding of reality which give

38 Weschler, 2008, p. 141

39 Lipsey, 1997, p. 67

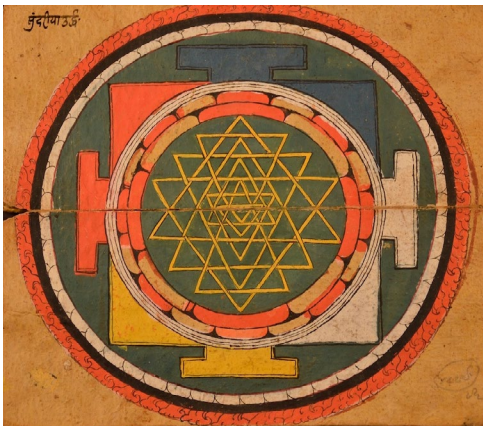
power to the imagery, and allow this cross-cultural, interdimensional, timeless appreciation of certain works of art.

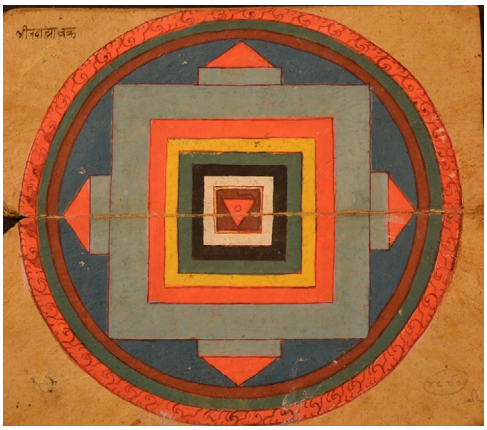
7. 7 Immediacy of perception and experiential knowing

The imagery studied through the research process encourages experience of the work itself, rather than the ingrained response to interpret, to move into mental meaning-making. Irwin wonders whether we can stand in front of an abstract painting without trying to 'Rorschach or psychoanalyse' it.[40] Reinhardt describes his work as 'Art-as-Art' (a term also used by Mondrian), rather than art as a signifier, symbol, representation of something else.[41] He promotes 'meaninglessness'.[42] Agnes Martin states, 'My paintings have neither objects, nor space, nor time, nor anything – no forms'.[43] Her work induces a sense of quiet contemplation, and while it is possible to be drawn in towards detail, to observe the subtle fluctuations of line, in time the whole emerges as a field of overall vibration which pervades the senses. The geometrical complexity of the *yantra*, the intricacy of Martin's grids or Mondrian's distillations instil an absorption, providing the possibility of simply experiencing the work. This creates the potential for the viewer to remain within the perceptual experience rather than moving forward into thinking or theorizing, encouraging the ability to be still and silent before the artwork, to be with the thing itself. The effect of the work is also achieved through the artist's aspiration, as in Martin's aim for perfection, and the fundamentalist and often humorous insistence by Reinhardt on an extreme artistic purity, ('making it purer and emptier, more absolute and more exclusive – non-objective, non-representational, non-figurative, non-imagist, non-expressionist, non-subjective'[44]) which results in an unexpected experience of sublime beauty. As suggested by Tagore, it carries the mind of the aesthete towards the formless Infinite.[45]

The experience of confronting the stark black ovoid of the *liṅga,* or the gold expanse of the Absolute might be considered in terms of 'aesthetic shock', or *saṃvega*, and the term could equally be applied to the radical simplicity and audacity of the Malevich black square, hung in the 1915 *Suprematism* exhibition in the conventional position of the household orthodox icon, or the 1966 exhibition at the Jewish Museum of 16 of Reinhardt's five foot square more-or-less identical black canvases. But this is a shock that brings stillness, demands attention, not a turning away.

40 Robert Irwin, *Notes Toward a Conditional Art*, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2017, p. 285
41 Veen, p. 465
42 Reinhardt, in Rose, 1973, p. 18
43 Lovatt, 2015, p. 104
44 Reinhardt, in Rose, 1973, p. 53
45 Dehejia, 2000, p. 13





Figs. 160, 161, Two pages of small *yantra* 'prayer book'
Bharat Kala Bhavan (with permissions)

7. 8 *Afterword*

While engaging in the making of traditional imagery enabled a deeper understanding of its meaning, the process also provided insight into these images of western abstraction. 'Universality' and 'tradition' were referred to in the writings of these artists, they aimed for the timeless and the changeless. Stripping back to the essence of things uncovers what have been referred to as 'universal truths', but maybe these truths are simply our shared human experience, understood and expressed across cultures, just a part of living on the earth within a human body. The knowledge that these works embody is the kind of self-knowledge and self-awareness proposed by Dehejia and Coomaraswamy, the 'awareness of our own awareness' suggested by Rinder, and the amazement at our perception hinted at by Irwin.

I began the research questioning whether this kind of reaction/interaction/participation is possible within a contemporary painting practice. After Reinhardt's early death in 1967, was it still possible to make paintings that evoke the sublime? Or could this only be found in Irwin's scrims and site-specific interventions, the soaring sculptures of Richard Serra, the land-works or pilgrimage conceptions of Richard Long, the video work of Bill Viola, the Sky Spaces of James Turrell? Had the postmodern era, with its insistence on 'art reflecting life', pushed any kind of transcendent inclinations in the artist to the side? Cornelia Parker and Susan Hiller have managed to blend the numinous with the everyday; deeply connected to materiality and the mundane, but also reaching into the infinite. More recently, Katie Paterson plays with time, space and materials, bouncing sound waves off the surface of the moon, invoking distant galaxies, moon dust, and geological time.

Working within the traditional arts re-awakened my belief that painting could still be absorbing and transformative. I became intrigued with the spaciousness possible within the small, hand held object – the space that could open up within the miniature. I became fascinated by the

impersonal and the functional. Holding the *Sādanamāla* it was clear to see that this is a well-used, functional object – a kind of portable visual prayer book. Similarly, other small *yantra* I had seen in various museum collections in India had often been folded, probably to be carried around in a pocket, or, as Jamme observed, 'in the little sacks carried by wandering ascetics'.[46] I liked the idea of usefulness and portability. It brought to mind the portable shrines found both in Japan and medieval Europe, with their predominant use of gold, black and red.

While I find nothing equivalent to the work of Reinhardt and Martin within contemporary painting, I am drawn to the miniature, and to small works on paper, which seem more able to convey a sense of the numinous. I want to make things that can be carried around, pinned on the wall, used for some kind of contemplative practice. While within the current of art history, the works which instil that same quality of absorption have moved off the wall, into larger environmental pieces, video art and installation, engagement with the traditional arts confirmed my decision to remain with the small, the personal and the handmade. The works and writings of Mondrian and Malevich amaze with their radical simplicity; while those of Martin and Reinhardt somehow confirm that it is worth continuing to pursue this attempt to capture the numinous in materiality, struggling with perfections and imperfections, while hoping to gain an intimacy with the formless – to be comfortable sitting at that gate.

I leave the research process with an enhanced appreciation of Arts Practice as Research as a valid and invaluable research methodology. The knowldege gained through making not only unlocked the theological/liturgical content of the sacred imagery studied, but provided insights into the mechanisms of perception which can be applied to any artwork. The knowledge gained through making is an embodied understanding, and the processes of APaR with their constant interweaving of practical and text-based learning allow a depth of understanding embedded within experience. This is enhanced when working with the imagery and texts of the Hindu traditions, which have an intrinsic understanding of body-mind connection. I reflect back to Madhu Khanna's assertion that *tantra* needs to be understood visually, and would add that the actual process of making allows an immersive, embodied understanding; a training of the senses which becomes part of everyday awareness.

46 Jamme, 2011, p. 99

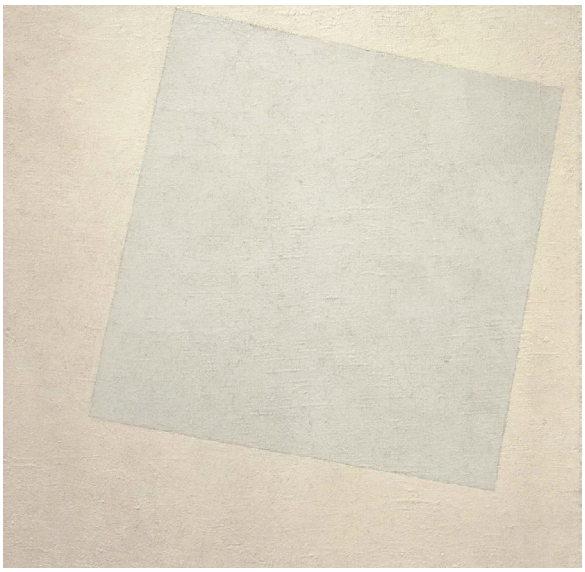


Fig. 162, Kazimir Malevich
Suprematist Composition: White on White, 1918
After *Malevich*, Tate Publications, 2014, p. 121

Appendix 1: METHODS AND MATERIALS

Pigments, papers and boards

PIGMENT MAKING – MINERALS

AZURITE, MALACHITE, CHRYSOCOLLA, CINNABAR

MALACHITE, AZURITE and CHRYSOCOLLA were pounded with brass pestle and mortar, covered with muslin cloth. The powder is transferred to a porcelain mortar and ground with purified water. This is then washed several times, the water drained off and kept in a separate container. The process is repeated until the water is clear – maybe 10 washes. 3 or 4 different grades/colours of pigment were obtained. Once the pigment is dry, it can be ground with various mediums. (Here gum arabic, from Kordofan, Sudan). If using for egg tempera, further grinding on granite slab with water.

Malachite, Azurite

Chrysocolla

Azurite after pounding in brass pestle and mortar

Chrysocolla after pounding in brass pestle and mortar

Malachite, Azurite, Chrysocolla

Washed Azurite

Grinding with gum arabic

CINNABAR uses the same method (with more care as the substance is toxic). The mineral is harder so requires more pounding in the brass mortar. The washing process differs as various pourings are made throughout the process. The cleanest pigment may be found in the first pourings. Four pourings are made at each stage before regrinding. Further washing removes more impurities. The final stage produces only impurities and mercury.

Cinnabar

Pounding cinnabar - with care

Grinding with water

Washing ground cinnabar

Stages of washing

Remaining mercury impurities

PIGMENT MAKING – LAPIS LAZULI

LAPIS LAZULI
darker stones are of superior quality

Heat lapis in a stainless steel pan – as hot as possible

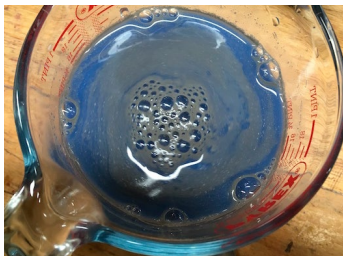
Pour white wine vinegar to cover. This will fracture the stone

Pound in brass pestle and mortar and return to heat.

Remove larger rocks and repeat

Repeat as necessary.

Sieve through 80 dn. mesh - repeat several times



Wash in water. Leave to settle. Impurities rise to the surface.

Rinse several times.

Drain off liquid. Leave to dry and gently heat if necessary. Must be bone dry to mix with putty.

Making putty: beeswax, roisin, colophany, larch turpentine mixed according to 15th C recipe.

Mix the dry powder with the putty

This is a gradual mixing process – taking up the maximum lapis possible. Roll into sausage/cigar shapes. Leave to dry for 2-3 days. Massage lapis and putty sausages gently in water (plus a small pinch of soda ash) Lapis pigment drops and collects. Dry thoroughly.

PIGMENT MAKING – PLANTS AND INSECTS – LAKES

PERSIAN BERRY, MADDER ROOT, BRAZIL WOOD, COCHINEAL

PERSIAN BERRY

MADDER ROOT
washed briefly before grinding

COCHINEAL

Raw material is ground with porcelain pestle and mortar. Soda ash solution (25% soda/75% water) is added to draw out colour. Pour solution through muslin. Squeeze gently into tall plastic water bottle. Add mordant (20% alum to water/50/50 with soda solution) to drained liquid. Leave overnight. Squeeze again and hang up to drain. Spread out to dry.

BRAZIL WOOD - powdered

Brazil wood with soda ash
strained through muslin

Brazil wood with alum mordant

Persian berry with soda ash

Persian berry with soda ash
squeezed through muslin

Adding alum mordant

Seive again and hang to dry.
Water may be used as dye or
used to colour paper.

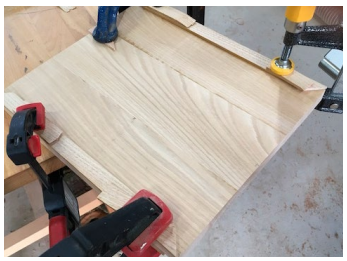
Persian berry - after hanging
spread out to dry

Persian berry - dried pigment
to be ground with gum arabic

PREPARATION OF SURFACES: GESSO BOARDS AND VASLI PAPER

MAKING GESSO BOARDS

Oak boards, cut and glued together



Fixing trim

Finished board

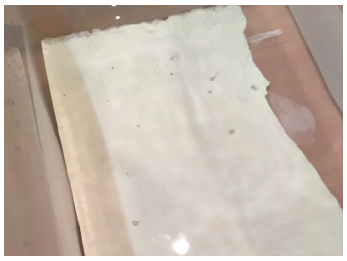
Ply boards covered with muslin

Making gesso

Drying the finished boards

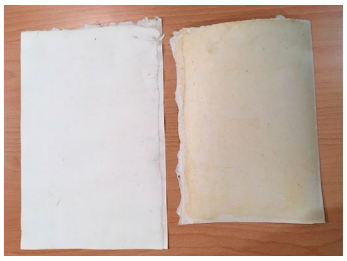
The first three images show a process of making two icon boards from oak planks. Made in the workshop of a friend. The following images take the process forward. The boards (in this case marine ply) are sanded and covered with muslin, coated in a warm rabbit skin glue solution for adhesion. Gesso is prepared from rabbit skin glue and whiting (chalk), possibly with the addition of marble dust; generally 1 part glue to 10 parts whiting. 7 - 10 layers of gesso are applied in alternate directions, followed by several hours of sanding once completely dry - usually in 2 - 3 days.

MAKING *VASLI* PAPER



Soaking the paper

Layering the soaked paper



Layered paper - usually three sheets

Preparing kharia

Kharia - filtered and ready to use

Burnishing on a glass or granite slab

Jute paper is soaked until water has been evenly absorbed. Rice flour or similar paste is used to paste layers together while slightly damp. Pasted sheets are placed under a weight (e. g. a board and several heavy books). Once dry it is coated with two or three layers of kharia (fine chalk solution) and burnished well before use.

Appendix 11:

Conversation with Nicola Durvasula

During my first field trip to India, I stayed for a few weeks in Varanasi, and spent some time at the Alice Boner Centre, attending talks and visiting the library. I knew of Alice Boner's work on the geometry of temple sculpture and architecture, and, at that time, two large rooms in the Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum were dedicated to her work.

Nicola was the first recipient of the Shelagh Cluett research grant, which sponsors artists' residencies at the centre. I came across her work and writings on the centre's website, and was inspired to contact her on my return to the UK. We have kept in touch throughout the process of this research. Nicola has provided support and encouragement, and was for me an important link to a contemporary artist who is inspired by tradition, but remains very much embedded within the current flow of art history.

I asked Nicola what had originally taken her to India, and discovered that her interest in Indian music and sculpture seemed to reflect that of Alice Boner herself.

ND: My interest in traditional Indian sculpture was the main reason I travelled to India. I was living in Paris and had begun to read Indian philosophy, which really came about through my meeting with Virginia Whiles, who was also living in Paris at that time. I made regular visits to the Musée Guimet to draw from the Indian sculptures and became fascinated by the difference I felt working with these Indian forms compared to drawing from classical Western sculpture which had been part of my training when attending art school in France. I had never felt comfortable working with anatomical sculptures, but this felt familiar, I felt at home with it. Drawing from the Indian sculptures was a way to understand the forms, not for their anatomical correctness, but more the sense of harmony. I understood that this was more to do with an inner essence, and I also appreciated the devotional aspect of these works. There seems to be the possibility of some kind of transformation or 'two way process' that can happen when working with these sculptures, which reminds me of John Berger's discussion on the possible dialogue between self and object.

> Image making begins with interrogating appearances and making marks. Every artist discovers that drawing – when it is an urgent activity – is a two-way process. To draw is not only to measure and put down, it is also to receive. When the intensity of looking reaches a certain degree, one becomes aware of an equally intense energy coming towards one, through the appearance of whatever it is one is scrutinizing. …The encounter of

> these two energies, their dialogue, does not have the form of question and answer. It is a ferocious and inarticulated dialogue. To sustain it requires faith.[1]

So it was Indian sculpture that first took me to India. On those early trips, I travelled alone all around India, visiting major historic sites and museums, looking at and drawing from the sculpture. I also became fascinated by sacred stones, the lingas, which spoke to me, so I ended up making drawings of both sculptures and stones. This was a new language, but a language which felt familiar and I was curious to know more. The painting that you have illustrated (fig. 24) came from that time, after my first trip to India, but before I moved to live there permanently. It began as a drawing of the seated Buddha, but was reduced and refined until just the white triangle remained. It was an important informative work from that time.

SH: So you eventually moved to India?

ND: Yes – I moved to Hyderabad in 1992 and was then invited to teach western art history at the Sarojini Naidu School of Arts & Communication - University of Hyderabad. Coming from a milieu of French philosophy, and the philosophy of the absurd – I had more French than English influence at that time and I was enjoying finding out about this new culture through the Arts. I was encouraged by artist Laxma Goud to draw with a brush which really helped me to think about line – not simply about what I was drawing and but how I was drawing, and this had a transformative effect on my work. I developed a quality of line using the kind of very fine brush used in Indian miniature painting. It was a pivotal moment – to experience that fluidity and sensuality of line. At this time there was more figuration than abstraction in my work alongside conceptual work involving everyday objects. However line was always the predominant factor. I became involved with the world of contemporary Indian art, and showed with many Indian artists working at that time. This absorption into line took me back to thinking about music and more particularly Nāda yoga, the yoga of sound and vibration.

SH: Yes - I was about to ask about that connection. I know that sound, vibration has played an important part in your recent work, and wondered about the origins of that.

ND: I have played the piano since I was seven years old, and continue to play. Sight reading has always been easy for me, however as I have never been able to play from memory, I felt quite restricted having to read from the score. For this reason I found the Graphic Notations immensely freeing as a means of breaking away from traditional Western notation by using symbols to create visual scores. My musical mentor John Tilbury had introduced this idea to me and I discovered that my fines lines could now be interpreted and played as a score - which

1 John Berger, *Berger on Drawing: A Professional Secret*, Occasional Press, 2005, p. 75

Fig. 163, Nicola Durvasula, Untitled (Pink Stripe XI)
2021, Watercolour, Gouache, pencil, 10 cm x 12 cm

enabled the listening process. I began to research into the field of sound, inspired by 20th century graphic notations and also for example traditional Tibetan musical scores. I wrote a text 'On the Nature of Sound' 2019 and also began Vedic chanting. On my first visit to India I was struck by the beautiful, mesmerising quality of these chants and how familiar they seemed, instilling in me a feeling of 'coming home'. Studying these chants requires immense discipline and absolute adherence to strict rules of pronunciation, rhythm etc (quite the contrary of Graphic Notations). I continue to dive deeper into the realm of sound and more recently have learnt stotrams such as Sri Lalitha Sahasranama Stotram and Sri Lalitha Trisati Stotram. Sri Lalita being the presiding deity of yogic practices associated with the Sri Chakra or Sri Yantra which of course ties in with your research.

SH. When I first came across your work at the Alice Boner Centre I read some of your diary notes, which were published on their website, and this stuck in my mind,

Anatomy of a single note – floating in space – what if, in these graphic notations, I break down even further the structure of the note/dot/bindu – what would happen then? Would we enter a black hole, the pinhole of truth… like an onion, remove all layers and get to the heart of the 'MATTER' which is infinitesimally finite?

ND: Yes. Interesting that you mention that quote, as I meant to add 'and finitely infinitesimal' after 'infinitesimally finite'.

SH. Those note books seem to be very important to your work, and I remember you saying that these pages formed part of several exhibitions in Paris.

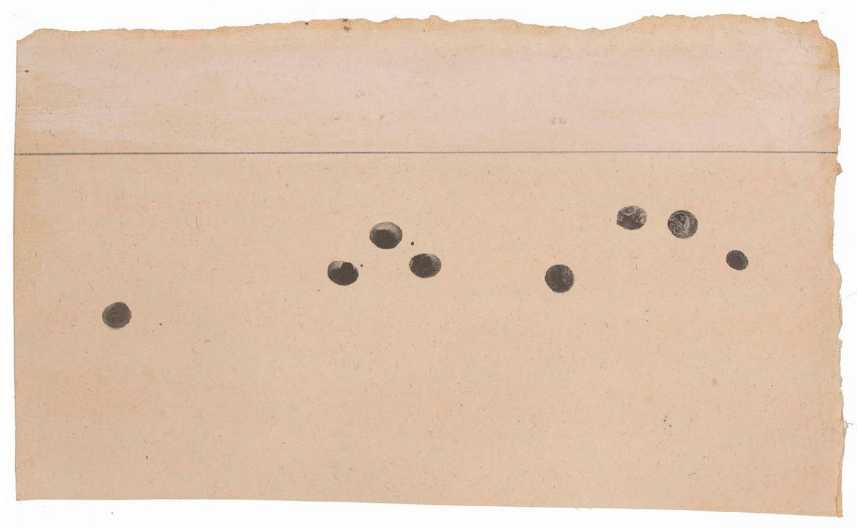


Fig. 164, Nicola Durvasula, Interlude (for John Tilbury)
2019, Gouache, graphite, 18 cm x 30 cm

ND: Very important yes. They are closest to – I was going to say who I am, but they reflect my process most closely. Written notes, but drawing notes as well. They are works in process, they are a mirror to my way of thinking, written at times when I am most relaxed. The diary notes combine everything within my practice, including what we may call the spiritual search – the ideas and teachings that have influenced me ever since I began reading asian philosophy when I was in my early 20s. They are a process of philosophical questioning, an attempt to feel secure with those teachings. They reflect where I am coming from – in a raw state. I would write notes without overthinking. Without censoring. Ideas materialise in my head - making thoughts concrete.

There is such freedom in writing like that. A lucidity, which came to be reflected in my process of working. It is my process of inquiry, my questioning as an artist. Questioning from a ground, which for me is these spiritual teachings. The notes are the work… from the notes I can take an idea forward. The notes are the raw material. Closest to who I am or who I am not.

SH: So you feel that you are exploring this philosophy through your visual work.

ND: Yes, absolutely.

SH: Can you define a process where these thoughts and ideas morph into visual expression? You are not simply illustrating your ideas… what are you doing through the work?

ND: I have no sense of visualisation. I see nothing in my mind before I start working. Seeds of ideas evolve through the process of making art. I have zero idea when I go into the studio.

SH: Your recent work seems to have been led by colour.

ND: Yes. When I was on the residency in Varanasi, I made a series of monochromes. When I was living in India, I resisted using the simple bright colours, which are typical, say, of Indian miniature painting. But here I moved away from figuration into pure colour. And also away from my indoctrination into western colour theory, allowing myself to use colour intuitively. Knowing when a colour is right. Knowing when to stop. Simply working with colour and surface. I allowed myself to be influenced by the flat colour fields of Indian miniature painting, and also began using Ganges water with the pigment. I began to have more feeling towards the materials that I was using – which felt conceptual to me. The materials had meaning. These colour paintings and the work which followed formed the 2023 exhibition with Joost van den Bergh.

SH: It is interesting that you mention your relationship with the materials, and specifically that you were using Ganges water conceptually. I suppose I think of Ganges water as giving the painting a kind of power. But it's interesting to think of that as a concept… which of course it is. It is also a reality?

ND: Working at the Alice Boner centre, I watched the Ganges every day. I was very inspired by the power of the Ganges. That constant flow. It was very important to me that I made those monochromes there. I was affected by the idea of this eternal flow, which also added to my understanding of Indian music such as Dhrupad, and allowed me also to get into Vedic chanting (which is not considered music). When I first heard the Vedas chanted I was aware that this was a very ancient sound. Just three notes. It all reflects that flow. When I returned to the UK I began to explore the texts that related to chanting, but I realised that it has to be understood through experience. I began to experience sound differently. Ideas are now germinating from this experience of chanting. It is an exploration of the nature of sound, and this is now coming into visual work. It has to do with a quality of listening.

SH: So a quality of listening and a quality of looking… which is where you began your Indian journey.

ND: Yes, and I think that it is sound that will carry me into the next phase of making art.

Appendix 1I1:

Conversation with Joost van den Bergh

I first came across the name Joost van den Bergh when I discovered his publication Magic Markings in Foyles' art section. The book both surprised and delighted. It was one of those 'meetings' that set things in motion, and became instrumental in my decision to follow this research path. Another fortuitous meeting with Nicola Durvasula provided an introduction to Joost, and prompted several visits to his small gallery in London St. James'.

When I came back from my second field trip to India, Joost kindly allowed me to look at some of his collections, memorably a group of extraordinary śāligrāma stones and his collection of Vyakul paintings. I was curious to know how Joost had become interested in these things, when he first became a collector and dealer in tantric objects and paintings.

Our conversation was interspersed with searches through Joost's vast collection of books and exhibition catalogues, in order to look at an image or to check the date of a particular show. So it was a conversation well illustrated with images.

I asked Joost when he first became aware of the art of tantra.

JB: It was in the mid 1990s. I was already dealing in Indian art in a very small way, and would go regularly go to Portobello Road. I used to visit a book stall there, and one day I noticed this interesting red spine and when I pulled the book out, it had a beautiful simple graphic cover. I've always liked good graphic design. But when I opened it up, something happened within me. I saw all these extraordinary geometric forms, which were in fact *yantra* – and this was the original Hayward Tantra catalogue. I still cherish this catalogue – even though not all the contents are accurate!

I was immediately struck by the geometric and minimalist forms, which is what I've always appreciated in modern art. Here you see the same idea but with a very ancient philosophy behind it. It's this philosophy, of course, that makes them so intriguing, and that awoke something within me. Very soon after that I began to immerse myself, and just by talking to people in the market I was very soon offered my first *yantra*. I bought a beautiful little copper *yantra* which is now in the Art Gallery of NSW (Sydney). So it became a bit of an obsession – and still is in a way, though it's much more difficult to find things now.

The Hayward catalogue is still one of my go-to publications. I still enjoy looking at it, though I take the attributions with a pinch of salt. And I've actually dealt with a few items from the catalogue over the years, things I bought at auction which still had the label of the museum in Durham, which is where Philip Rawson was working at that time. The original photographs for the catalogue also turned up at auction, and I often wish I could have bought them!

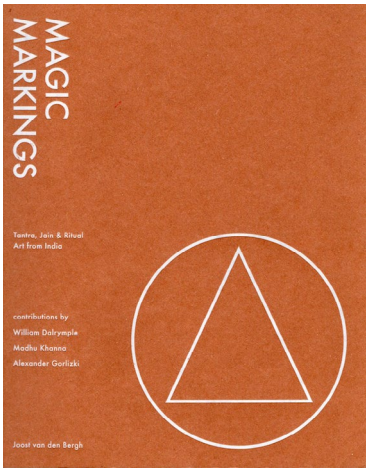


Fig. 164, Magic Markings
Exhibition Catalogue, Joost van den Berg, 2016

Fig. 164, Perfect Presence
Exhibition Catalogue, Joost van den Berg, 2019

SH: It seems that there was this flurry of interest in the late 60s and early 70s – and then everything went very quiet for a while.

JB: And it still is very quiet. I have helped to pick up interest a little, but I am not sure that many other people are involved with the work. I think the interest in the mid-60s was mostly down to Jean Claude Ciacimino. He made his first trip to India in 1968, bought a lot of work back and had his first Tantra exhibitions that same year. I have some items that he bought on that first trip. His were really the first commercial shows around tantric art. Jean Claude had an amazing eye, he was an art dealer and was very instrumental in showing the work to a wider audience. He made some very interesting little catalogues at that time. He took the work to America the following year, and other dealers became interested. [Ciancimino lists 12 shows between 1968 and 1974.] Robert Fraser also began collecting and exhibiting Tantric Art in the early 1970s, and it became a bit of a celebrity-hippy thing.

SH: Then there seems to be little activity until Franck André Jamme began exhibiting in the 1990s?

JB: He did a small Tantra show in Paris with Agnes B. and then another with Vyakul. He came across the Tantra Song work, which he promoted very heavily. I was offered those works on several occasions, but they somehow leave me cold. I have never liked using the word spiritual, but I don't find the works in that collection to be spiritual. Whereas the Vyakul work has a real depth and is much more meaningful for me. Though of course we cannot officially call it 'tantric' as it is signed.

SH: I find that interesting as I am fascinated by the effect of the images. Why we are drawn to some and not others. How do the images act, what is their effect? It was the black Śiva *liṅga* ovoids and the black square paintings that spoke to me in that collection – not so much the other small abstracts.

JB: Yes. Franck André also introduced the Vyakul paintings within the 'Magiciens de la Terre' exhibition. That exhibition was very influential. There is not a lot of information on Vyakul. I went recently to Holland to view a small collection of five or six works held by Museum Arnhem. MOMA also has a work by Vyakul, and the work is also in BAM/PFA, Berkeley, California.

SH: So you are planning a show of your Vyakul collections sometime next year?

JB: The Vyakul show is more or less ready to go. It took a long time to get the catalogue just right – but I think it's now ready. I just have to find the right time.

SH: And do you think you will have another *tantra* show? Concentrating more on the geometrics? The *yantra*?

JB: I have done three shows with the tantric work. It would be difficult for me to put together another show and catalogue of that work now as there is so little good quality, genuine work available. But I also think it is interesting to explore other areas. I have been obsessed with Vyakul's work for a very long time, and I was very excited to find my first piece some time in the 1990s. I now have a very good body of work and it is exciting to do something with that. The other *tantra* inspired artist that I have collected is Kalu Ram. Of course they are very different, the work is more figurative. But there is a similar energy to the work. I don't know if they knew each other, but they were both from Jaipur. There is still a lot of interest in his work and I hope to put on another show sometime.

SH: It seems that you began your collecting when you were very young!

JB: I dropped out of school in Holland, but had been offered a place to study art history in London, so I came here. The course was completely focused on Western art, and I knew nothing about Asian art at that time. But then I started working at Sotheby's as a volunteer in the painting department, and was later offered a job back in Holland with a dealer in Chinese art. I didn't really want to be in Holland, and didn't much like Chinese art, but I learnt a huge amount in a very short time. I handled a lot of Chinese porcelain, and I can certainly see its value, but it doesn't touch me. Through attending Art Fairs with the gallery I started to get to know that world of Asian art. Spink were the leading dealers in Chinese, but also Indian and Himalayan art, at that time, so I became friendly with people in the Indian department. After a while I

Fig. 166, *Kalu Ram*
Exhibition Catalogue, Joost van den Berg, 2020

Fig. 167, *Shrinathji*
Exhibition Catalogue, Joost van den Berg, 2021

decided to come back to London to learn conservation, and I was given Indian miniatures and drawings to restore. That's how I first really came in contact with Indian art.

SH: So you have had quite a lot of hands-on experience?

JB: In the past, yes. Not any more. But I met people in the Tibetan and Himalayan departments, and from there it began to grow.

SH: You also show some Japanese work?

JB: Yes, Japan came much later. I had contacts in Japan through a friend, and discovered some strange Art-Deco style things in Kyoto. I became fascinated with them, initially just for fun, but then they became a whole new thing for me. It shows that you really have to travel, to go to these places to discover new things.

SH: The Japanese work that you have shown here in your gallery is more contemporary?

JB: Modern. Yes, I have a few works by some people who are still alive, but most of the work I have collected is 1920s to 1980s. I love the Bauhaus and De Stijl, and this is a kind of movement in Japan from that time. Of course it is different, but it has the same quality – a kind of stylised Japanese Art-Deco which also merged into the 'Gutai' [often translated as Concrete Art] movement of the 1950s and 60s. It was and still is very affordable, and seemed like a good extension to the Indian art. I felt I could develop that. It wasn't a plan – it happened gradually. But I love that era. I initially began buying the paintings for myself.

[Joost pointed out two minimal paintings on the walls of his office from his Japan collections. The conversation drifted into considering influence, and Joost mentions the influence of *tantra* on Jasper John, though with reservations.]

JB: Of course, we have no idea how these things actually work. It may be easy to be influenced in a way that is not much to do with *tantra* at all!

SH: But picking up that Tantra catalogue, for you it was a recognition, rather than an influence.

JB: Yes, absolutely.

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