As in the Flesh: A Slide Presentation

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I envision this evening as a three part presentation. In the first part I will tell you about the progression of paintings done in the last six months, particularly a series of watercolors I have entitled *As in the Flesh.* I will briefly review notions pertinent to the creation of these paintings by analysts such as Klein, Winnicott, Segal, Bion, Meltzer, Matte Blanco and others, all the while trying to establish parallels between the creative process and the events in the consulting room, between the artist at work and the analyst dealing with a patient. I am leaving most of the slides for the second part of this presentation. In the third part we will hopefully have questions and an interchange.

Over 20 years ago I hired my own model and embarked on a series of figurative watercolors, some quite realistic and some freer and verging on abstraction (6 slides of old work). In my art teacher's studio I had earlier on carried out a series of compositions on paper using a model as a stimulus. I wanted to go back to that kind of work and see what I could do now, so many years later.

The Process Begins

After painting some large canvases for the Florence Biennale 2002 that involved vigorous physical work with the paintings on the floor, I wanted to move back to the less strenuous and more intimate work on paper done at a table and hired a model again. The first time Sara

came I wasn't sure what to ask her to do. I knew I didn't want to do realism and, after she undressed, she asked me if I would like her to move slowly. I want to introduce her to you with these slides (5 slides of Sara). I didn't expect to be in such awe of her beautiful body moving mindfully in an exquisite way. I began to draw with a watercolor pencil on the wet paper that I was simultaneously coating with color and where I was also, on and off, spilling paint in order to create accidents and unexpected "events".

In the first few paintings I freely superimposed her body but one could still recognize four or five discreet bodies in the finished painting (8 slides with beginning figures showing the progression toward abstraction). In time I decided I would simply depict the model's movements. I wasn't sure what I was after but it was much closer to what I seemed to have had in mind.

We have had a few 2 1/2 hour sessions, the work changing toward complete abstraction and a new absence of articulation that has become very satisfying to me. I have continued to experiment with her movements. With the attempts that didn't satisfy me I used the existing drawing as a starting point for a transition and transformation into something else, elaborating the space, adding complexity and forgetting what was there before. In these 3 slides we can see how in the abstract painting even Sara's movements are hidden from view. In this case the paintings took off in their own direction.
(Stop projector here)

In one of our sessions I asked Sara if she would mind having Shostakovich's music in the background - up to that point she was moving without any music. She asked me if I would mind that she moved to the music. Of course, I was delighted. As she was moving very slowly to the Andantino of Shostakovich's Quartet # 15 a *different quality of experience took hold and* I began to draw on the wet paper with both hands, each with a different color pencil (I will show you these paintings at the end). The combination of the somewhat controlled line from my right hand and the clumsy line from my left hand was immensely gratifying. The left hand added the ugly, nasty and destructive element was missing in the other watercolors that were risking to become too pretty. At some point I didn't know whether the music was coming from the CD player, from her exquisite *body or from my hands and pencils.* As she does each time, Sara came over to see what I did and loved the resulting scribbles and smudges of the pencils. We were both in something like a state of grace when I was able to finish four of these paintings.

Several years ago I did nine paintings to Pierre Boulez's music but could not bring myself to do Shostakovich's Quartets, perhaps because they are filled with all shades of despair and, at the time, I was fighting off despair. The week before the last session with Sara I had a dream of *a garden with no flowers, a garden neglected and I was very upset as to how I had allowed this to happen. Then I saw some pots with plants, all dried for lack of water. I picked up one and half of the root was no longer attached to the plant. But to my amazement, there was a little sprout of light green leaves to the side of the main stem. I was looking for my daughter Denise to show her this amazing thing, that the plant*

had survived in spite of it all. The next morning I was still filled with the dream image and told my husband, "I think I can now paint to Shostakovich's Quartets". What I didn't anticipate was that I would be doing that through Sara's body.

Examining the Process

I now will attempt to understand what went on between my model, myself and my developing paintings. This constitute an effort to think through what my doing was about. In Matte Blanco's terms, to use my asymmetrical being, my thinking being, to understand my symmetrical experience, my feeling being. For the artist the work comes to be not only a separate self or a separate object but a representation of what is internal. According to Segal, artists aim at establishing a truth about their inner reality and it is the contact with this truth that accounts for the experience of satisfaction for the artist and of aesthetic pleasure for the viewer. The viewer identifies with the work of art as a whole and with the whole internal world of the artist as represented by his work. I have used accidents in the ongoing work, dreams and now my left hand to facilitate a contact with what is internal, with what I don't yet know and may not want to know.

One of the most consciously gratifying aspects of creative work for the artist is to confirm in the painting, the music, the piece of writing, a correspondence, a congruence with what is internal. The completed art work, if gratifying, is a successful representation of what is true internally. Whatever personal conflicts the work has come out of, if it is to succeed as art it objectifies these conflicts and these conflicts

are universal. Therefore, for some art critics, the art work should explain itself and not require an exploration of the artist's life to understand it. Furthermore, as art critic Kuhns (1983) writes, "art is not simply a working through of the artist's problems and conflicts; it is a representation of universal communal conflicts in which everyone is entangled" (p. 103).

The artist's relationship to his or her art is a type of object relationship, imbued with reality and fantasy, comparable to that between patient and analyst. In my case we have to add the role of the model since I was so greatly touched by her beauty and her movements. If we consider my model as a Muse we can remember Plato who writes in the *Ion* about how the Muse inspires and possesses the artist empowering him or her to create. He writes, "...every poet has some Muse from whom he is suspended, and by whom he is said to be possessed, which is nearly the same thing; for he is taken hold of" (p, 536). It is clear that in my experience painting Sarah, she and I had become one. I was at least mixed up with my model and the feelings I encountered were primitive in origin. There was probably also a primitive empathy at work based on identification with my model's movements and, as I drew, I felt this in both hands and particularly in my fingers holding the pencils. From an object relation point of view, she was probably standing for my mother, the mother of infancy in all her perceived beauty (Meltzer, 1988). Whereas Plato says the artist is possessed by the Muse, we would say that it is the artist who possesses the mother in the Muse.

The Inner Process of the Artist: the Meaning of Creativity

In *On Not Being Able to Paint*, Marion Milner (1957) made an independent discovery of Winnicott's *transitional space*, the sense of being separate and together. She worried that her wish to become more "mixed up" with objects while she drew – an instance of regression - might work against her wish to be a separate person in the real world. Instead she experienced her wish to become one with the object as a need to go back to look for something that would have value in her adult life if it was recovered. She quotes Cezanne who beautifully describes the way in which both the artist and later the viewer, the art lover, can lose their grip on conscious activity. "[A painting is] an abyss in which the eye is lost. All these tones circulate in the blood. One is revivified, born into the real world, one finds oneself, *one becomes the painting.* To love a painting, one must first have drunk deeply of it in long draughts. Lose consciousness, descend with the painter into the dim tangled roots of things, and rise again from them in colors, be steeped in the light of them "(in Milner p. 25).

While the artist is trying to get to the truth of the object, the model, he can't help project aspects of himself into it. Figurative artist Lucien Freud's early portraits had all his models depicted with very big eyes. A fellow artist who studied with him in London many years ago told me that Freud himself had amazingly big eyes, that those eyes in his early portraits were, in fact, his eyes. I can think of another instance of this phenomenon. I recently saw the figurative drawings an artist friend has been making of Sara, our model, my model! I commented that Sara's slim body seemed much heavier in the drawings. Smiling sheepishly in

recognition my friend said, "I guess I give my models my own body". I have still another example of how while trying to get a true representation of the model the artist projects aspects of himself or herself into it. A few years ago another artist friend did a portrait of me but the face she painted didn't quite resemble my face. After examining it carefully we decided that the problem was in the shape of my nose, which wasn't right. We scheduled another sitting for her to try to correct it and after trying and trying to change my nose in the portrait she exclaimed in disbelief, "You know what? I gave you my nose! That is my nose!"

All of this to illustrate how in the mix up with the model the artist can't help projecting into it aspects of the self. While at work the artist is in the intermediate area of experience Winnicott refers to when he writes about transitional phenomena and transitional objects. One may want to be truly objective and depict the truth of the object but the object's truth and our own truth become indistinguishable. I have to think that something of myself has gone into these recent paintings even though they are ostensibly about my model's movements. Likewise, if we enter a state of reverie with our patients and, as Bion has suggested, we abstain from memory and desire, we may be unwittingly projecting aspects of ourselves in the patient. But this need not worry us that we, analysts and therapists, will be losing our so called objectivity. I believe that in our work with patients we experience similar states of fusion and separation than the ones involved during the creative process. Meltzer, for example, is not afraid of getting mixed up with his patients. In his book Dream Life (1984) he tells us that in his work with patients' dreams he projects

himself into the dream to experience it as if it was his own dream. He can only then use his understanding of this dream, which has become his, and offer the patient an interpretation.

Within the Kleinian tradition the emphasis has been, when it comes to creativity, on the artist's unconscious phantasies toward the internal parents and in particular the destructive ones. For Segal, the artist has to confront the effect that his or her aggression has had on the loved objects in internal reality. Creative activity instigates a re-awakening of the internal anxieties and conflicts of the depressive position whereby the person experiences anxiety about the attacks on the internal objects, guilt for the damage done and the wish to repair. For Segal, the act of creation is actually a recreation. What is felt as a lost past and a lost or dead object, the product of rage and destructiveness, must be adequately mourned in order to be successfully re-created. Guilt and despair generated by these attacks drive the artist to reparative activities. The actual process of creation is experienced as infusing dead objects with new life, rejuvenating them, reviving them and restoring their lost, destroyed and depleted potency. If you remember, in my dream of the neglected garden I must have became aware of my neglect toward my objects and confronted the devastation of my attacks on them. I was relieved to still find some life in all the destruction I had caused. In my wanting to paint the Shostakovich's Quartets and depict their despair I was apparently willing to mourn my attacks and repair the damage by bringing new life to them. Perhaps my left hand making clumsy, "ugly" lines, was leaving traces of the earlier attacks on my parents and they were satisfying to me insofar as they represented my truth about these attacks. I

experienced relief, however, that these ugly markings on the paper were counteracted by the more swift and harmonious line of my right hand who would carry out the parallel reparation. For Segal creative work is a genital bisexual activity based on adequate identification with a father who gives a mother a child and a mother who bears it. It is an identification with a restored parental couple in the internal world. This is perhaps why these series of paintings have been so deeply satisfying.

Bion

I now would like to briefly examine what Bion (1962) would have to say regarding this work. Bion saw the mind as extremely limited in its ability to comprehend reality. For him our mind is unable to discern the underlying pattern of phenomena concealed in a formless infinite. He suggests that perhaps these underlying patterns can only be hinted at in art, music, poetry. Bion considered the various psychoanalytic theories as surface manifestations of an underlying configuration and directed his attention to the universal restriction of thinking and how it blocks awareness of psychic truth. Bion was profoundly concerned with what occurred in the consulting room but he used this only as a window into the whole human phenomenon. He was committed to the view that there is an absolute truth which can never be known directly, and he called this absolute truth, the thing in itself, O. We cannot know O itself but only emanations from it which are perceived as phenomena. What we know of O are our transformations of it. This is similar to Plato's ideal of which we only see the shadow on the wall of the cave.

" In a slightly different way, transient experiences of becoming O can be felt as being 'allowed' to us by the object; this is the experience of being at one with O, no matter for how short a time and it is an experience like incarnation, becoming of the same flesh" (Symington, 1996). My experience with Sara is precisely that of being allowed to transform her body in movement onto lines in my painting. This experiencing of O is, to me, related to the experience of fusion with the model that I have described. For Bion (1970), religious mystics and artists probably approximate most closely to the expression and experience of O. However, for him the pathway by which such an experience becomes possible is through the close relationship with another and this includes the relationship of the artist with work in progress. Psychoanalysis is the investigation of such a relationship and is what I am attempting to do here by critically examining what went on in the creation of these paintings and in my relationship with my model. Psychoanalysis and Art: Matte Blanco

We can examine now how Matte Blanco's ideas about thinking in the conscious mind and feeling in the unconscious mind helps understand what happened with these paintings. Viewed from the outside, from the area of thinking, the unconscious, according to Matte Blanco, is composed of infinite sets but we can only think about these infinite sets in terms of discrete elements. We cannot think and have the experience of the infinite at the same time. This seems to explain why I was so bothered initially by the discreet bodies of the model on the paper. Apparently I wanted to go deeper into a symmetrical way of seeing, not only by fusing with my model but by having Sara's body fuse with herself or replicate herself many times over. I wanted to

depict infinite movement and a continuous experience of Sara's body. Matte Blanco has explored in detail the dichotomy between thinking and feeling. From his perspective, what I am trying to do with this paper is the opposite than what I was doing with my model. Whereas while painting I wanted to go deeper into feelings and to extract feeling from thinking, in trying to understand what I did and write about it I am extracting thinking from feeling.

Marion Milner

The workings of conscious and unconscious activity in the arts continues to intrigue psychoanalysts. I have already mentioned Marion Milner, psychoanalyst and artist of the British middle school, who wrote sensitively about her own experiences, not only trying to free herself in her paintings but in the pursuit of ineffable qualities of experience. Her book, *On Not Being Able to Paint* (1950) is a marvelous application of Kleinian theory to her own experience painting. According to Ehrenzweig, (1967) psychoanalyst and art teacher, the artist experiences a genuine conflict between two kinds of sensibility, conscious intellect and unconscious intuition. His concerns parallel Winnicott's, Bion and Matte Blanco's. Ehrenzweig, however is, without a doubt, the most cogent writer about the conflicts of the artist with the work in progress and has written specifically about the problems of the contemporary artist trying to break through established patterns of seeing and doing. He writes about the differentiated surface functions of the conscious mind as opposed to the undifferentiated depth functions of the unconscious mind, another way of contrasting thinking and feeling but this time applying these notions to the artist's

struggle. "The modern artist attacks his own rational sensibilities in order to make room for spontaneous growth. A vicious circle operates. The attacked surface faculties fight back in self-defense and overnight the spontaneous breakthrough from below is turned into another deliberate, manneristic device. This in turns stifles further spontaneity and has to be overthrown by another burst from the depth...This total victory of the depth functions leads to an equally drastic defensive action on the part of the surface functions. Creativity is always linked with the happy moment when all conscious control can be forgotten "(p 66). I hope to have shown how my provoking accidents with water and paint, my use of the clumsy left hand, are my attempts to bring up elements from the depth of my unconscious mind. When a painting is not satisfying because, to me, it looks contrived or too finished, I will use the existing structure as a starting point for a new attempt at a breakthrough during which I hope to be surprised by what happens to it.

Ehrenzweig also writes about satisfying work: "A truly fertile 'motif' - in music or drama as well as in the visual arts - often has something incomplete and vague about its structure. It bears the imprint of the undifferentiated vision which created it in the first place and which guides its use....A fertile motif, through its undifferentiated structure, often refuses immediate aesthetic satisfaction...The gestalt law of 'closure' ruling our surface vision will always strive to round it off and polish its structure prematurely and so may cut off its further development...Fortunately, the creative thinker is at home in those deeper mental levels where the gestalt principle no longer holds sway" (ibid, p.49).

Something like a true conversation takes place between the artist and his own work. Often times the medium, by frustrating the artist's purely conscious intentions, allows him to contact more submerged parts of his own personality and draw them for conscious contemplation...Taking back from the work on a conscious level what has been projected into it on an unconscious level is perhaps the most fruitful and painful result of creativity.

After I did a number of paintings of my model's movements on paper I decided to expand the work and paint with acrylic paint on large canvases. This represented a challenge insofar as I could no longer do the background and the markings of Sara's movements at the same time. I opted for preparing the canvases first with some washes and accidents to already have some interesting events going on their surface. All I did with Sara was to paint her movements while crouching on the floor and using a large Chinese brush and a string dipped in black paint, at times one on each hand (I will illustrate later). This represented a new challenge and a way to move things to a different level.

Creative Regression in Art and Psychoanalysis

In a presentation such as this, one needs to also recall the well known notion Kris developed in 1952 of the artist being capable of regression in the service of the ego. For Kris this process resemble childlike states or characteristics usually associated with madness but they are under the artist's control. The artist has the capacity to make the

transition back from these primitive states to others requiring observation, discipline, and criticism. The question as to what facilitates creative regression is pertinent to both the work of the psychoanalyst and the artist. In my experience as a painter, even though my attention is on my model, I am, as I said earlier, after discovering what I don't yet know and may not like to know.

In a recent revision of the concept of regression in the service of the ego, Knafo (2002) wishes to update the term by expanding its use beyond ego psychology. She defines it as "..the ability to maintain contact with early body and self states and with early forms of object relationships, as well as with different modes of thinking" (p. 29). For Knafo, "Creative regression is facilitated by the artistic setting and relationship to one's craft, just as therapeutic regression is facilitated by the analytic frame and transference relationship" (p. 46). She clearly sees a parallel between the regression in art and the regression required of patient and analyst in the consulting room.

Psychoanalytic papers by Galler (1981) Loewald, (1981) and Tuttman (1979) recognize the hybrid quality of regression's potential for both pathological deterioration and reorganization or integration. Artists have tried to capitalize on the potential for re-organization of this regression; they value and cultivate it. They try to go back to the world of the infant, imbued with a dynamic sense of physical and emotional involvement, where knowing and feeling are not yet differentiated and even inanimate objects are experienced as vital and alive. In the Manifesto of Surrealism, André Breton (1924/1972) writes, "From childhood memories, and from a few others, there

emanates a sentiment of being *unintegrated,* and then later of *having gone astray,* which I hold to be the most fertile that exists" p 39-40). More recently contemporary artist Willem de Kooning (In Schiff, 2002) has followed in this tradition of promoting regression when he writes, "When I am falling, I'm doing all right. When I am slipping, I say, 'Hey, this is very interesting' !' It is when I am standing upright that bothers me. I'm not doing so good. I'm stiff, you know"
(p 157). He facilitated his figure drawing by closing his eyes, concentrating inwardly, centering and intensifying his sensation. He also removed the eye from the hand's production so that the two senses would cease to operate in mutual support. As a controlled loss of control the method caused skill and chance to become indistinguishable. De Kooning's strategies succeeded in distancing him from proper proportion and conventional form and led him to breakthrough in his powerful paintings of women.

What about the viewer's regression? Just as the analyst is called upon to regress temporarily along with his or her patients (Blum 1994, Loewald, 1981), so too the art audience is invited to participate in regressive processes parallel to those the artist experiences during creation as well as the regression depicted in the artwork itself. These regressive forces ultimately belong to a dynamic two way relationship between artist and viewer. Those who allow themselves to regress as part of their aesthetic response to artworks become not only art observers but also co-creators.

Bion argued the an analyst has to approach the patient without memory and desire. This is precisely the attitude that I am taking as I

look at the model. I allow the stimulus to be the main thing and to guide me and I free my mind and hands of pre-existing ideas. My model is the external stimulus for what my hands will do. I focus on Sara's movements, which in a way means that I de-personify her; I respond to the structure of the movement rather than to "Sara moving". Which reminds me that the infant seems to respond to the abstract dimension whereby things that move together become an object, irrespective of the nature of the object that moves.

The parallel to the analytic situation lies in the fact that in our work we listen to what the patient is saying and observe what he or she is doing but we are, from all those external manifestations and like with the model's movements, extracting the transference. We attempt to get at the phantasy about the analyst that underlies the manifest content of the patient's communications. The model's movements and the transference constitute our focus and we need to somehow ignore the rest - my model's beautiful hair, her alabaster skin, the light on her body, aspects of the patient's narrative and its details that don't seem that pertinent to the transference. This brings us back to a consideration of the inherent truth we are all after, analysts and artists and how, just like the transference, this inherent truth has to be extracted from what is in front of us. The outward appearance does not by itself constitute the truth. Matisse has been quoted as saying that an inherent truth must be *disengaged* from the outward appearance of the object to be represented.

What about the relationship between psychic and external reality? When I moved from this work on paper to the large canvases and

working on the floor I found myself acting as an intermediary between what was already on the prepared surface and the movements I was extracting from my model. The canvas could be seen to represent my pre-existing psychic reality, the model's movements the external reality. My experiencing of the movement is fluid, dynamic but always linked to what is already on the canvas, my psychic reality. This means that the movement would be represented differently in two different canvases because the existing psychic reality is different. The implication seems to be that we experience external reality only through our psychic reality and that there is a degree of correspondence between the two. As Winnicott, Milner, Ehrenzweig and others have pointed out, there need not be a dichotomy between psychic reality and external reality. They have recognized the value of the intermediate form of experience in play, creativity and psychoanalytic work. As I said earlier, for me the paper, the canvas, and the events already there constitute my pre-existing psychic reality while the model's movement represents my external reality. But I find what I am looking for between the two.

Current developments within psychoanalysis provide a favorable climate for a richer dialogue between art criticism and psychoanalysis. Analysts in the cutting edge of theory have recently begun to talk in aesthetic terms both about their ideas and their practice. Robert Michaels (1981), for example, speaks of psychoanalytic theories as being similar to works of art and claims that they "can be appreciated and evaluated aesthetically as well as scientifically" (p.8). Spence and Schafer have reversed the direction of the interdisciplinary dialogue by borrowing their terms and notions from aesthetics rather than

applying psychoanalysis to issues pertaining to the aesthetic domain. Spence argues that analysts are "functioning as artists and storytellers in the analytic hour" (1982, p 23) and he considers "aesthetic finality" an essential ingredient of an interpretation that hits the mark. He even claims that a "psychoanalytic interpretation can be seen as a kind of artistic product, and as such, it becomes possible to consider its effect on the patient as a kind of aesthetic experience" (p.37). On the same line Loewald has argued that if one takes an interdisciplinary perspective on symbolism, one might be tempted to define the aim of psychoanalysis as enabling patients to increase their capacity for symbolization, as restoring their formerly crippled symbolic functioning, as bringing multiple connections back into consciousness and thus enriching their inner life with meaning. (14 slides of paintings and 16 of canvases done with both hands)

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