

Destructiveness and Reparation in the Creative Process:
A Retrospective

Desy Safán-Gerard, Ph.D.

Abstract

In this slide presentation the author reviews a sample of paintings made over a span of nearly 30 years. A paper built around a selection of slides represents a unique attempt to develop a psychoanalytic understanding of an artistic career since in this case the artist is also the analyst. Even though the paper might be thought of as an attempt at self-analysis through painting, which it is, it is primarily an exploration of some ideas about creativity, particularly the idea that destructiveness is an intrinsic part of the creative process. Two main forms of destructiveness are in evidence in the work. The Kleinian conception of destructiveness followed by reparation is mostly apparent in the content of some of the paintings and in the analysis of the dreams the author had at the time. A different kind of destructiveness is the one the artist engages in during a painting in progress in order to further the work's development. This view of destructiveness was put forth in 1912 by Sabina Spielrein in a seminal paper, "Destructiveness as the Cause of Coming into Being". Perhaps a better term to characterize this form of destructiveness is 'ruthlessness', the impulse to destroy whose aim is giving birth to something new. This ruthlessness becomes apparent in the account of how the work on certain paintings has proceeded. Questions are raised as to the integrative value of the artist's work for the artist as compared with the integration achieved in an analysis.

Destructiveness and Reparation in the Creative Process:

a Retrospective

Desy Safán-Gerard, Ph.D.

I am about to show you paintings I made over a span of nearly 30 years. Even though this presentation might be thought of as an attempt at self-analysis using a body of work, which it is, it is primarily an attempt to present some ideas about the creative process using myself as the subject of inquiry. The main idea is that destructiveness in its various forms is an intrinsic part of the creative process. In 1912 Sabina Spielrein advanced this idea in a seminal contribution entitled, "Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being". Her publication anticipated by eight years Freud's conception of the death instinct and in fact Freud acknowledges Spielrein's contribution in his 1920 death instinct paper. Spielrein's paper, with many examples both from biology and mythology, placed destructiveness at the center not only of psychopathology but of personality development. Spielrein's destructiveness is not fueled by hatred of the good object and the wish to attack and destroy it, as described by M. Klein (1935), but by the desire to destroy something that is not satisfying in order to give birth to something that is (Kerr, 1993). Spielrein's destructiveness is akin to the ruthlessness Winnicott wrote about (1969), the necessary destructiveness in order to allow the emergence of something new. I believe both kinds of destructiveness are reflected in my work: destructiveness proper in the accidents with which I start some of my work and in the content of some of my paintings and ruthlessness in the execution of the work. Moreover, one could say that the ruthlessness Spielrein refers to is motivated by love for the object, that it may have a better life, a true life, an independent life. Thus, even though this paper's focus is on destructiveness, we have to keep in mind the love

underlying it; it is the love that translates into what we call beauty.

An initial review of my paintings for this analysis made me realize that major themes kept coming back at different times. So I have sacrificed the strict chronology by reorganizing the slides around themes. As a preview and to guide your viewing I can already tell you that the themes in the earlier work are: accidents and repairing them, the mother baby pair, the inside of the mother's body, the father, and a pictorial comment on relationships. These themes reappear in later works: my blue period (why not?), the exuberant work, my Boulez Series, and the Totem Series on collage, large canvases, and monoprints.

Before telling you about how I have interpreted this work I want to emphasize that the psychodynamic formulations were nowhere in my mind while I was painting. In addition, I no longer have access to the associations or fantasies that accompanied them. In fact, I ended my first attempt at understanding and interpreting the evolution of a single painting (Safán-Gerard, 1983) with the realization that the analysis was interfering with the work. It is only in retrospect that I can now look at my early paintings the way one would look at a child's drawing. Klein's *Narrative of a Child Analysis* (1961) has been very present in my mind. I have become both the Richard who did those paintings and the Mrs. Klein who interpreted them. She was in a better position than I am, however, because she was interpreting Richard's paintings in the context of the events of the session and the child's associations. I can only do it in relation to the larger events of my life. One piece of biography that can, to some degree, account for some of my destructiveness is having been the oldest of four sisters and having been asked many times to look after them. These sisters, born one after the other in rapid succession, led to a special curiosity about my mother's body as well as to an early turning away from my mother to my father as a replacement.

I began to paint during my graduate training in clinical psychology at UCLA by

attending an unstructured class with Keith Finch, a gifted teacher who allowed me to develop in my own way and at my own pace. His class was on Tuesday afternoons and I protected that time from any intrusion. Now, five years after Keith's death, I have made a vow to keep Tuesday afternoons free of patients to pursue my painting. My training was not formal. I never took anatomy drawing lessons with a model, for example. I started directly with abstraction.

Accidents and repairing them

One of the ways I got myself started was by creating an accident on paper or on canvas, the uglier the better, and by using paints at random. I worked flat on a table, initially only with watercolors (Fig. A). Once I had an accident on the paper, I had a problem to solve: how to make it work. This involved a close scrutiny of the accident and trial and error in pursuing the work. These paintings are an example of work I did in my first two years of painting (Fig. 1, 2 and 3).

In addition to the initial accident, there are unwanted accidents that take place at various times throughout the work. These accidents are the pictorial equivalent of a slip of the tongue, revealing unconscious impulses. Artists have to contain their first inclination to eliminate them by distancing from them for a while. I, for example, tend to work on other areas of the painting or put the whole painting aside for a later time when I am readier to work on it. In both cases I seem to be lowering my anxiety enough to be able to look at the accident again and confront my projections in it. In his *Reminiscences*, Kandinsky (1913) states that, for him, accidents allow a puzzling play of forces that he experienced as alien to himself. As he put it, "I owe much to these accidents: They have taught me more than any teacher or master" (p.34). I believe that "working on a painting offers the opportunity to bring back into the self what has been projected into it." (Safán-Gerard, 1982, p. 14).

It appears that the accident with which I start new work carries my aggression

and, as Adrian Stokes states in *The Invitation in Art* (1965), the first step in starting artistic work contains aggression and explains the painter's or the writer's anxiety facing the virgin canvas or page. In searching internally for material to put on the canvas or the page, the painter and the writer may come in contact with destroyed or damaged internal objects or with impulses to destroy the object, which give rise to anxiety. Along similar lines, both Ella Sharpe (1930) and John Rickman (1940) relate the 'ugly' to the fragmented and destroyed object, whereas they relate the 'beautiful' to the experience of the whole object and its goodness. However, what is aesthetic is not only what is beautiful. For Segal (1991) "the aesthetic experience is...a particular combination of what has been called 'ugly' and what could be called 'beautiful'" (p.90). In working through the accident and repairing it, one adds beauty to what is ugly, reparation to what was damage or destroyed, but the traces of the destructiveness are still embedded in the work. To quote Segal once again, "True reparation, in contrast to manic reparation, must include an acknowledgment of aggression and its effect. And there can be no art without aggression" (1991, p. 92). By this, she means that the aggression may have been carried out in phantasy prior to creating. "One may need to create because one has destroyed (1998)". Thus, traces of the destroyed object must be part of the painting and coexist with its reparation.

One can then begin to understand the motivation fueling these accidents and what the page or the canvas stand for. For Kandinsky (ibid.) "the pure canvas is as *beautiful* as a painting" (his italics). Yet, he adds, "each work originates just as does the cosmos - through catastrophes" (In Herbert, 1964, p. 35). Perhaps implied in Kandinsky's statement is a phantasy-level recognition of the canvas as the primary object. The pristine canvas, insofar as it is the color of milk and acts as a container of our communications, may stand for the primary object, the mother. The spilling of paint on the pure canvas could be seen as representing incontinence and an attack on or even the destruction of the mother with urine and feces. This is not unlike the phantasies of young children during play, as

revealed in analysis. The attempt to make something of the accident is clearly related to restitution and repair of the damage. So when I paint, I seem to be recreating cycles of destruction and reparation, going from a state of unintegration of love and hate where hate leads to phantasized attacks on the object, to the painful integration of ambivalent feelings when one repairs the damage, even though, according to Segal (1991), “the artist’s reparative work is never completed” (p. 94).

Another way in which this cycle is expressed is in abstract landscapes where it became a challenge to extract light out of the darkness, something quite difficult to do with watercolors (Fig. 4 and 5). I believe the challenge was again related to repair since darkness is often associated with dark passions and destructiveness. Artist and art historian Roland Reiss (1998), writing about my work, has pointed out that I am first and foremost a luminist (Fig. 6 and 7). He concludes, “In actual fact her paintings appear to emanate an internal light which suffuses pictorial space and imagery”. He is certainly pointing to the reparative aspect of my work, and to attempts to turn chaos into something integrated. The accident may then represent the manic destructive attack, leading to guilt and reparation.

In her seminal paper “Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse”, M. Klein (1929) concludes that just as painter Ruth Kjar’s compelling urge to paint was based on the desire to make reparation, other paintings of hers were more directly an expression of a primary, sadistic desire to destroy. Similarly, as you will notice later on, some of my paintings represent the wish to repair while others more directly give expression to my destructiveness. Each painting can be looked at as a frozen record of some place in the path between Ps and D.

Mother-baby

While examining the slides for this presentation I realized that many of the earliest watercolors contained a large figure on the left and a small figure on the right (Fig. 8, 9, 10 and 11) Even in my later attempts at realism this seems to hold true as is the case with the barn with a big window and a little window (Fig. 12) or the big court yard and the small court yard on the right (Fig. 13). This one represents an attempt to put together different photographs of a trip to Brittany, creating something new out of disparate scenes. A broken up mother and the attempt to bring the parts together suggests reparation.

Attacks on the mother's body

In the abstract landscapes that follow, I believe what is being depicted is the inside of the mother's body. As Roland Reiss observed (1998), "The idea of landscape which underlies many of [my] compositions is quickly transformed into the idea of internal landscape as well " (p. 2). Some of these paintings seem to show a harmonious inside while others have ominous undertones of disaster (Fig. 14, 15, 16, 17, 18). The disaster follows the sadistic attacks on the harmony. While reviewing these slides for this presentation I discovered that there was what could be thought of as a birth canal between the happenings at the bottom and the space up above, inside and outside (Fig. 19, 20). In fact I was surprised to discover that the last two paintings of this series, which were supposed to hang together, seem to have sketches of a baby in each of the apertures. (Fig. 22 and 22). I did not remember having intended that.

Bizarre objects

In the following slides one can also see how the attack on the mother or on the parental couple results in mutants, bizarre objects (Fig. 23, 24 and 25). This is envy at work at all levels: the mother's body, the father's penis, the babies inside the mother. Even in the loving feelings there is damage because of the devouring quality of this love and the wish to possess. The following painting is

perhaps the most primitive (Fig 26 A). My son had started a drawing that intrigued me and I finished it. The big fish has eaten the little fish. One can see how the attack on the mother's body leads to a powerful attacking mother-fish that can swallow up the little me. One could say that the painting represents the outcome of projective identification in which the attack by the little fish caused the big mother-fish to eat the baby fish. Either in love or in hate, the relationship to the mother is devouring. Therefore the mother object is now felt to possess the child's projected mouth. I have inserted here drawing # 7 of the 10 year old Richard, Klein's patient in the *Narrative of a Child Analysis*. (1961, p. 10) (Fig 26 B). Richard drew this in the fifteenth session. In the analysis of this drawing the fat fish on top stands for mommy. This big fish had eaten the starfish, which represented both daddy's devouring genital and the baby Richard growing inside her. Klein adds that, "the starfish also stood for the greedy and frustrated baby - himself - injuring and eating mommy's inside when he wanted her and she did not come" (p. 79). She implies here that her patient's attacks were partly due to the frustration of an unresponsive mother. I have noted earlier that I was the oldest of four sisters and I can well imagine that, like Richard's mother, my mother was frustrating to me, busy as she was with my younger siblings. This may account in part for the evidence of unmitigated destructiveness in my early paintings.

The next watercolor (Fig. 27) has an amazing story. During my graduate work at UCLA I had an internship at Children's Hospital. I worked for a while in the dialysis unit, having the children and their mothers communicate with each other through drawings. I used to bring my own materials and once, by mistake, I took a watercolor pad with a painting I had just been working on. The little patient I showed it to said, "There is a baby here calling, Mommy!" The hair on the back of my neck stood up because I had just had a miscarriage. That the young patient could respond to the baby I had lost, and that the baby was felt to be in distress calling for me, was utterly amazing. In retrospect we could say that the painting depicts my attack on my mother's body that has a counterpart in the

attack on my own creativity. Because of my attack, I now had a vindictive internal mother who attacked my baby. Another way of looking at it is that I was identifying with a mother with a destroyed baby and thus had to destroy my baby. These are persecutory (the vindictive internal mother) and depressive (the destroyed internal mother) versions of the outcome. The depressive solution, namely, the identification with a damaged mother, leads to unconscious guilt which makes me suffer the damage I feel I have produced.

Is there some way to support these interpretations? In the absence of associations or the context of a session, I turn now to a dream I had at the beginning of my second analysis some 15 years ago that seem to illustrate a similar dynamic and offers some validation for the interpretations of the paintings: *I am looking for an apartment for my son Mauricio. I enter through a courtyard. It is a sophisticated place, not elegant but full of books. "How would they rent this to Mauricio?", I thought. My husband and I explore the place. There is a huge grand piano with rich brown color in the living room. I move an ashtray on it and to my amazement there is a hole that reveals water underneath it. It is lit up inside and there are little bugs, like ants, swarming in there. I quickly cover the hole. I subsequently find something inside my mouth, something grainy. I try to spit it out but can't. I go into the bathroom and look in the mirror. I try to get it out of my mouth with a towel when I realize that what I have in my mouth is what is inside the piano. The bugs are breeding inside me and I am horrified. In terror I call for help and wake up.*

As you can see, this dream illustrates how the attacks on the mother have an effect on my own creativity. I identify with a damaged mother - bugs instead of babies in her body - by having the bugs inside my mouth. If we look closely at the elements of the dream we find that looking for a place for my son may stand for a search for a place for the me who would not benefit from the sophisticated elegance of the place, especially from the books and learning from them, the me who, out of envy, is unable to feed properly. The boy part of me is envious of

the mother and the babies the father puts inside her. This me won't take things in my mouth in a good way but what I do take in will be filled with envy and greed. The large piano may stand for my mother's body, the ashtray covering her vagina. I fill the lit space with these ants and bugs breeding there instead of live babies, an attack on my mother's generativity. I cover the space again with the ashtray to deny what I have done and to either say to myself, "I didn't do it" or "It's full of shit anyway". Then I find that the same bugs and ants are in my own mouth, part of my own body, which reveals that I was in fact the perpetrator of the crime. By projective identification I end up experiencing and identifying with the attack directed at my mother.

Since this was an early dream in the analysis we can speculate that the new situation with this new mommy/analyst is stimulating phantasies of the earliest attacks on my mother and they are being relived in the transference. I had had recurrent primitive dreams about trying to get hairs and gunk out of my mouth unsuccessfully but up to this point it had never been clear to me that what I created inside the piano was the antecedent, the cause, of these recurrent dreams. In other words, I always felt that these awful things I had in my mouth were replicating my mother's attacks on me that I was trying to get rid of. Now I could see the role I had played. The analysis of this dream shows how attacking my mother's creativity may interfere with my own creativity. This consequence has revealed itself also in my not following up opportunities for showing my paintings because of a "lack of time". My attacks on my mother's babies results in miscarrying my own babies. One is tempted to ask whether this dynamic has affected my work as a painter. Were my attacks on the primary object affecting the paintings themselves? I believe that evidence of the attacks appear both in the content of these paintings and in the neglect of the work itself.

A second dream at about the same time depicts in more detail the insidious attacks on the mother's body and its consequences. It shows that, in killing my mother's babies, I kill the fruits of my parents' relationship, which means that I

have also attacked that relationship and my father as well. The result will be an internal couple that can't create new babies.

But not all is destructiveness. A recent dream shows how love is at times in the ascendance. *I am in a place like New Zealand, debating whether I should swim or not. The water looks fantastic. Some people in our group are snorkeling near the rocks. Do they have wet suits to bear the cold water? I am aware that there is a rich life underneath, as rich as in the Great Barrier Reef in Australia.* It reminds me of years ago in Hawaii going into a trance snorkeling in Hanuama Bay. After that vacation all my paintings would turn blue, no matter what color I started working with. The beautiful ocean must stand for the inside of my mother's body, the rich life inside it.

One of the startling things about this retrospective is that just bringing those early paintings to mind stirred up the early destructive phantasies that must have instigated the paintings in the first place. Recently when I was examining the earliest slides for this presentation I had a dream that seems to again portray the conflict between the destructive forces and the loving, reparative ones. This is probably what fueled the early paintings, a wish to represent this conflict and have the loving me win in the end, a conflict that may be ongoing in all my paintings. The different stages I have gone through in my work may end up representing many variations on the same theme of destruction and reparation.

Reparation

The next two paintings (Fig. 28 and 29) show how the bizarre objects of earlier paintings begin to get organized around a mandala type shape. According to Jung, mandalas represent attempts at reconciling opposites and achieving personality integration. Perhaps, out of guilt, these mandalas are my attempt to put together the hate and the love for my objects. As you will see, some sixteen

years later I would be doing some totems that seem to fulfill the same quest for integration. The next painting appears to represent the clearest attempt at reparation (Fig. 30). It is an abstract depiction of surgeons at work. One day, ready to resume work on this watercolor, I noticed a beautiful epiphilium bloom in the garden, took it to my studio and suddenly decided to paint it in the place where the patient's flesh could be seen. The second epiphilium to the left was a response to the requirement of balance in the painting. At the time I felt that at this juncture the painting had acquired a life of its own - the surgeons at work that had fascinated me had given way to a separate painting that was telling me what it needed. I now can see that the second epiphilium may stand for the daddy. Mommy was restored - a flower instead of her sick body - and daddy was with her. The parents were now together, he on the left, she on the right, just like the mommy and baby of earlier paintings.

Mother as a whole object

In some paintings in Keith's studio, we had two minute poses of a live model and we were supposed to use the model's body as a stimulus to superimpose drawing upon drawing in order to create a design (Fig. 31, 32 and 33). The pleasure in carrying out these paintings may have to do with Winnicott's (1971) view of the use of the object. In this case the mother is shaped and manipulated at will in order to create a total structure that may, in turn, represent the good enough mother. Then there are versions of the mother that seem to provide evidence that the attacks on the mother's body have given way to an appreciation of her beauty. The first is an attempt at the three Graces, the mother from various angles (Fig. 34). In some of these nudes the drawing predominates and others are done with a minimum of drawing where the point is to create volume with different shades of sepia. Another attempt is to paint the woman with one's touch rather than by seeing her. The pleasure here is having a body emerge on the paper as a result of the minimal use of paint, to recognize one's capacity to create it without what I have come to see as the envious

attacks of earlier paintings. So we have here the heavy woman (Fig. 35, 36 and 37), the pregnant woman (Fig. 38), the beautifully dressed young woman (Fig. 39).

But, just as things would seem to get better in relation to my destructiveness and I seemed to be allowing the mother a life of her own, we encounter this painting which seems to represent absolute possession and control over the mother (Fig. 40). The work seems to have been an afterthought. I remember I didn't like the rendering of the reclining woman and, rather than discarding it, I began to play with lines going into and out of her body. Control appears as a manic defense against a recognition of the mother as a separate object, a mother with a life of her own. However, the control mitigates the destructive feelings toward this mother. There is no guilt as yet over the control and no reparation. So, just as I seem to allow the mother a life of her own, I revert back to controlling her. This back and forth movement brings to mind Bion's (1963) correction of the Ps - D equation to a Ps—D with a double arrow in between: from a state of unmitigated love and hate (Ps) to the integration of ambivalence (D) and back again in a constant to and fro. Britton (1996) has studied the movement from D to Ps as it applies to the generation of new knowledge. For Britton, a return from D to Ps does not simply imply a regression to an earlier organization. Each time there is a return to Ps, there is the possibility of new knowledge and an increase in the capacity to search for it. One can conclude that these shifts from D to Ps and back to D are essential to enrich and further one's creative work.

Double paintings

The two figures in the early watercolors gave way later to what I have come to call the double paintings. Seven years into painting I hired my own model and I always managed to put two poses on each sheet of paper (Fig. 41, 42, 43 and 44). This is no longer a mother and baby but it may rather indicate a manic

defense against depression and mourning: I may lose one but I still have another. This idea of the double has extended to a tendency to paint in pairs with perhaps the same motive (Fig. 45).

Father

As I was reviewing the slides I kept finding this vertical format landscape that stood out and didn't seem to fit with any of the themes I had so far developed (Fig. 46). There were several other pieces for which I found the right place but this one was an irritation. I thought of deleting it from the presentation but I also knew it was one of the good watercolors and I had been quite thrilled with it when I painted it. I finally realized, "this strong tree keeps sticking out! But of course it sticks out. It's the penis!". Then I found these other two paintings with objects that seem quite different from the tree but in the same position on the paper: a collage painting (Fig. 47), and a small watercolor (Fig 48). The irritation at the slides probably mirrors the earliest irritation at an awareness of the father and of his relationship to the mother. A later turning toward the father may have been the result of the frustrations with the mother, especially due to weaning and toilet training but also in relation to the new babies who were demanding her attention. My father's presence as a whole object may have helped facilitate the problems of mourning in relation to my mother. As Segal (1991) notes, "It is an important aspect of the depressive position that the recognition of mother as a separate person includes the recognition of father as her partner rather than as a part object seen as her possession (e.g. the paintings with a penis inside mother's body) or as an object confused with her as in the phantasy of the combined parents" (e.g.. "The kiss", I will show shortly) (p.46).

As I write this paper it is puzzling to me that in comparison with all the paintings about the mother and mother's body there is so far such a paucity of examples of my relationship with my father. This is particularly strange because of the strong oedipal ties I had with my father as I was growing up. As a young girl I

became the 'little wife' who shared music with him in a way that my mother never did. His love of life and music was inspiring not only to me but to most of my young friends who wanted a daddy/husband like mine. An old friend called me from Chile when my father died and told me that he had been the model of what she wanted in her own husband. His importance in my life is revealed in the later paintings. Starting with the collage-paintings, the Totem Series are in a way, as Meltzer (1998) suggested, a monument to him after his death. Susan-Kavaler (1993) has pointed out the importance of the internal father for the women writers she studied, which may be the case for women artists in general.

Relationships

The following watercolor (Fig. 49) depicts an abstraction of a painting class with Keith, my teacher, dosing off on the left while three students paint from the model. He used to sit like that during our classes, a bit out of it but ready to help if we needed him. He probably represented what Grotstein (1981) has called the 'background object of identification' while we were the siblings venturing into the outside world. The next painting, ostensibly a further abstraction of the class, is already an envious attack on the father and his studio (Fig. 50). He had what the children needed, what I needed to continue to develop as an artist. As Segal notes (1991), "Once a higher mode of mental functioning is achieved, it is of course not achieved once and for all. There is always the potential for regression" (p. 48).

I now believe that the next painting depicts the primal scene (Fig. 51). It is a bizarre depiction of a kiss with the couple entangled in such a way that you don't know whose mouth or whose body it is. I believe this is the infantile version of the parent's intercourse and is tinged with aggression and sadism for we don't know if they are kissing or devouring each other. The parental couple is clearly depicting my own aggression and sadism toward them with its oral component.

This attack on the parental couple is followed by a painting I entitled "The Fight" (Fig. 52). This was supposed to be a demonic machine held by a witch-like creature who was keeping my husband and me turning around and around in an interminable fight. Conveniently my husband was losing - he looked apoplectic - and I have a mischievous smile revealing my triumph as I am winning. I remember well when I did this painting that everything turned out this way quite accidentally and to my amazement. The child's envy and jealousy leads to a triumphant attack on the couple and particularly on the father. One could say that by projective identification this attack on the parental couple in "The kiss" leads to an identification with a couple that devour each other in "The fight". My husband and I are the victims of this attack now turned toward ourselves in the form of a demonic machine that will make sure that we cannot get along.

Blue canvases

At a certain point my watercolors got larger and larger making framing them a problem of weight and cost. I began to explore the possibility of working on canvases with acrylic paint, doing it in such a way as to capture the fresh and improvisational quality of watercolors. Emulating Helen Frankenthaler, the New York based artist who developed the staining technique, I began to use acrylics on raw canvas by staining rather than actually painting on the surface with brushes. I diluted the acrylic paint and poured and manipulated the paint as it stained the canvas. Most of the time I worked on layer upon layer of diluted paint, pretty much as I had done with the watercolors. The staining gave me very little control of accidents, just as with watercolors. Once again, the accidents may represent incontinence and the infantile phantasy of damaging the object with urine and feces. I seldom used brushes, preferring squeegees to move the paint around. It was a period of expansion and more freedom. I worked on the floor, often on two or more paintings at a time so if one needed to

dry I could move to the other (Fig. 53). I worked mostly in a vertical format and many of these paintings ended up turning blue, even though I often started them in other colors. As I said earlier, the snorkling in Hawaii had a powerful effect on my paintings and their color. These paintings may represent the inside of the mother's body without the earlier attacks on it; I was simply peering into the mother's body and recognizing the rich life inside it. (Fig. 54, 55, 56, 57, 58 and 59). Fifteen years ago I used the first one of these paintings to study the creative process by photographing it at various points in its development and by keeping a journal of dreams (Safán-Gerard, 1983).

Exuberant Series

Then something strange happened. I emerged from my blue period with the use of exuberant color on canvas done with the same staining technique but this time by using more concentrated paint instead of the diluted washes of the blue paintings. I also worked on the floor pouring paint and leaving the accidents intact rather than working them over with layers of paint (Fig. 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65 and 66). This change may have been caused both by external artistic influences and by internal dynamics. At the time I was sharing a studio with a very imaginative Swedish artist who created banners and unusual flags in very bright colors. I also remember a two person show I had some years earlier with Keith, my art teacher, and how I felt that my subtle palette felt weak compared with his stronger paintings. Perhaps the most important determinant, however, was that at around that time I had temporarily separated from my husband. The intensity of the color might be related to the manic sense of freedom I was experiencing.

Toward the end of this body of work I again began to work in pairs that would be hung together to form large diptychs (Fig. 67, 68 and 69). It was a challenge to create two objects that, like the collage/paintings before, had their own integrity

and yet could be put together and give integrity to the whole. This pairing, however, is different from the pairs of models or the pairs of paintings in the past, the doubles. This time the emphasis was on creating two separate paintings, each of which could be one. It makes me think of two separate individuals coming together and creating a couple. And yet, you can separate them and each has its own life. In retrospect, this work was perhaps related to a new found harmony in my pairing with my husband.

The Boulez Series

What follows is a series of paintings based on music, the Boulez Series. I tried to paint the 9 movements of his *Le Marteau Sans Maître*, which were in turn based on poems by surrealist poet René Char (Fig. 70, 71, 72, 73 and 74). I believe this mixed media work on paper represents my way of getting inside the composer's mind and doing pictorially what he did musically. After all, as Pater (1961) has said, "all art constantly aspires toward the condition of music". Music had been my first art and will forever be linked to the memory of my father. During my youth, music was my means of artistic expression and creativity. Later this included music composition that I had to interrupt when my teacher left the country. The Boulez Series seems to represent my return to music, my wish to bring it back into my life, to defy mourning it.

In these small paintings I went back to paper and mixed media, watercolors and acrylic. I prepared a frame within the edges of the paper and I had the musical events, as I translated them into pictorial form, noted within this frame. However, I took pleasure in breaking the frame here and there as much as I enjoyed staying within it. The frame seems to control what it contains. If it is too rigid it annihilates. If it is too loose it fails to contain. Something destructive was at work blowing apart the creative coupling between painting and music. However, there was playfulness more than destructiveness in my attempts to loosen up the frame - like a toddler who wants to get away from mother but needs to keep

her in sight. I was trying to find the right amount of loosening up to create a sense of freedom without chaos. The reassurance lies in the fact that even though there were transgressions of the frame, for the most part the events were kept within it. In addition, it is worth remembering my struggle creating this work. I set out to follow the music as faithfully as I could by listening to it many times and by following the printed score, but oftentimes I felt trapped by that resolve and wanted the painting to take off on its own. I felt throughout that I was struggling with the wish to follow Boulez on the one hand and the wish to forget Boulez and serve the painting on the other. Was this the result of my claustrophobic anxieties of feeling trapped inside the object? After all, as I said, I wanted to get inside of Boulez's mind and I must have done so in fantasy. The pleasure in doing this work was connected, at least in my conscious mind, with a sense of a true collaboration with Boulez. I was thrilled to find out when Boulez actually saw these paintings that I had done his music justice: he immediately recognized which ones corresponded to each of the 9 movements.

Totems / monochromatic collages

The next set of paintings represents a drastic departure from my former work. I had lost the lease on my studio. I decided to go back to Keith, my old teacher, and make use of his studio on Tuesday afternoons taking advantage of his unstructured class. I was thinking of paintings I could easily take with me back and forth and I came upon the idea of using collages on paper. So I began combing magazines and newspapers for interesting images. I would do this while watching TV at home so the work was done "on the side" without much thinking. The first time I went to Keith with these clippings I suddenly drew a vertical line on the paper that was itself oriented vertically, and also some horizontal lines to guide my pasting over the vertical axis. Then I began to paste along the vertical line and to cut out shapes from the clippings that could be placed on each side. I was discovering symmetry! (Fig. 76, 77, 78 and 79). I still remember the excitement of this discovery. It felt so different than anything I had

done before. No sooner was I done with the first one than I did a second and a third one, and so on. Something amazing happened when, in a daring act that felt potentially destructive of the painting, I began to paint with gray washes over the whole thing. These washes were unifying and integrating the space. The darkness of the figures had to be replicated by darkness in the surrounding areas which I created by splattering dark paint here and there. As they dried I began to paste over them. I was doing the familiar layering of other work, building up the surfaces, making sure that the whole thing would work together. I never thought of the meaning of the images I had selected since I selected them because of their shape and value, not at all because of their content, although unconsciously this must have been critical. I would later be quite surprised at the readings people made as to what these paintings were about. What I was after was the total feeling. I so enjoyed the monochromatic nature of this work that I thought I would never again go back to working with color. I ended up doing 28 of these 16" by 20" images over the course of a year and a half. Once I had a series of them lying on the floor to make corrections on the lightness/darkness dimension so that the whole group would work together when my son Mauricio came to see them. He said, "These don't look like paper. They look like stones, like tombstones." This was the first time I linked this work to the death of my father two years before I started this new work. That was startling to me. I thought that surely the absence of color had to do with mourning him. That they looked like stones made me think of the Jewish tradition of leaving a stone at a graveside as a sign of remembering the dead person. Perhaps in these paintings I was visiting his grave.

The symmetry may be another version of the earlier mandalas in which the attempt at integration was evident. What was I bringing together here? Was it the mother's body after daddy's death? Was it the parental couple? I believe that the penis is clearly represented in the totem in the center, while the rest represents the beauty and symmetry of the mother's face and body. Perhaps the pleasure associated with this work had to do with allowing my parents to be

together. An alternative way of looking at symmetry was in the earlier mother-baby paintings. In this case the symmetry could be thought of as a defense against a recognition of the disparity between mother and baby. This interpretation points to a defensive use of symmetry rather than as another attempt at integration. An additional piece of information may shed light on my use of symmetry: my repeated trips to Bali and my exposure to the symmetry of the Balinese temples. When Keith, my art teacher, traveled to Bali with me and my husband and he saw for the first time one of the numerous temples he exclaimed, "There are your paintings, Desy!"

It is interesting to note that my use of symmetry seems also to go along with contemporary painting and a return to the sense that symmetry is more basic than composition. Artist Frank Stella claims that "In the new American painting we strive to get things in the middle and symmetrical, getting rid of composition effects which carry with them all structures, values, feelings of the whole European tradition" (1966). This seems to be the case in cultural development. Primitive sculpture makes use of a strict frontal symmetry which persists in Egyptian and early Greek styles (Sobel, 1982). There is something especially appealing to me in Greek, Cycladic sculpture, ca. 2600-2500 B.C. or the Dokathismata type, ca. 2400 B.C. The simplicity of the frontal view says, "This is it. Here I am, take it or leave it". As Fairbairn (1938) remarked, "It is hard to imagine any more convincing attempt to establish the integrity of the object than that represented by the symmetry of Greek architecture and by the perception of form and purity of line, which are such obvious features of Greek sculpture" (p.297).

Back to the process. I kept Xeroxing reduced images I particularly liked and recycled them in other paintings. On one of these trips to the Xeroxing emporium I looked at one of the images and saw a very large canvas with color and texture in it! I told Keith of this discovery. He concurred with me, adding, "Yes, but scale is important. They have to be very large". By this time we were

building a house where I would finally have my own studio so I eventually had enough space to work on them.

Totems / Large canvases

It took a while to work out the surface of these 5' by 7' canvases as there are no prescribed ways to do this. I wanted to get the surface to be like the mossy walls of the Balinese temples that so fascinated me. I also wanted to have a way of showing the viewer the history of the painting by revealing the layers of paint that went into it. I did this by creating a frame, but unlike the Boulez paintings, this frame would be a one inch linear dent on the canvas, a dent that would show the successive layers and acted as a grid over which the image would be placed. When I was happy with the texture I applied many layers of colors using a squeegee, and at times, a wet cloth. It was more like creating a patina on an old, old surface. Once I was satisfied with the result I used some of the reduced images of the earlier monochromatic totems and projected them onto the canvas with the help of an artograph. All I had to do was to outline that image with chalk. (Fig. 80). I made sure that part of the image somehow went over the grid, playing with the frame as in the Boulez paintings (Fig. 81, 82, 83, 84, 85 and 86). Sometimes I took portions of different collages to create a totally new image. Then I would place the large canvas on the floor and begin to paint into these shapes experimenting endlessly with the right colors and values. It was quite difficult to translate the black and white variations into color. The aim was to create a surface where nothing would stand out. In fact, I wanted the central totemic image to be totally immersed in the background, where figure and background would reverberate and shift easily. As you can see only the sixth one (Fig. 87) is close to this ideal and, to me, is the most satisfying.

Following my assessment of the monochromatic collage/paintings this attempt to bring closer the figure-ground nature of the work may mean that what I am after is still reparation of the parental couple and a more intense wish to get them together in harmony, something that had not been apparent in my parent's

marriage, a perception that must have fueled my wish to separate them.

The next three slides are paintings where texture itself became the object. I discovered the technique accidentally by telling a friend that I was after something like semolina that could be placed in a thin layer over painting on paper glued to the canvas and then pulled out here and there barely revealing the painting underneath. I had seen an exhibit of work like this by a French painter that was very exciting to me. A friend suggested scoopable kitty litter. I mixed it with water and gel medium and as a test I applied it with some difficulty to a small canvas. Two weeks later it had totally dried creating the most interesting crevasses and shapes, like a dried up lake or riverbed. I bought myself a big box of kitty litter and I began work on a series of imageless paintings in which texture was the object. I realized I was back to my idea of the accident of earlier work. In this case I had to deal with this accident of nature, allowing time, temperature and process to take place without my intervention, then to make do with the accident, just as I did in earlier work.

Totems / Monoprints

I came upon the idea of bringing the totem work into a different medium, monoprints, with the help of a fellow artist, Renata Zerner. The first time I took some of my unframed collages in an attempt to translate these images into this new medium. I painted on a Plexiglas plate selecting the pigments from sticky and unpredictable gobs of oil paint Renata had set out for me. I picked the colors randomly. In this way, I figured, I would be exploring unknown territory rather than repeating myself by choosing colors I was attracted to. You had to stick a palette knife into the paint and spread it thinly over a piece of paper to realize what color it really was and it was always very different than the gob of paint it came from. So in a way I felt I was painting in the dark, not having any idea how the monoprint would turn out.

To make things even more difficult, I wanted to break the images somewhat and get away from what looked like a solid totem, the figure, against an uninteresting background. I sprinkled alcohol over the whole thing. Also, I sprinkled a bit of turpentine. You could see the paint on the plate reacting to these substances. What this would do to the monoprint was an absolute mystery. After pressing, there was a completely strange painting that seemed to have no relationship whatsoever with what I had been doing. For one thing the image was reversed, the right was on the left and the left was now on the right. Then the color was too strong and bizarre. Renata suggested that we use a second sheet of paper on top of the same plate for a ghost copy. She set up the pressure to be stronger than the first time and after we ran the press we finally had something closer to what I had in mind, quite miraculously so, in fact. Then we made a third image with the same plate, applying still more pressure to the press. This time what emerged was very delicate and beautiful, a wispy reminder of the second one. These three and sometimes, later on, four versions of the same image needed to be corrected. This could be done using pastel sticks, releasing the powder in them by scratching them against a piece of cardboard and applying the powder very lightly over the needed areas with a tissue or cotton tip. I also used color pencils to emphasize areas or to change the color of other areas. This work required a critical eye and focused sensitivity. The changes were ever so subtle but very significant. Artists sometimes do the first copy on newspaper to dispose of it because the color tends to be too strong. I wanted to do them on regular paper to challenge myself to make something out of these "difficult" versions and I did. So what you see here are strong and subtle versions of the same image (Fig. 88, 89, 90, 91, 92 and 93).

I realize in hindsight that by working on these monoprints I was enlisting Renata with her gobs of unknown paint and the printing press to create the accident for me. Other than my initial laying of the paints on the plate, I retained the task of working it out and of repairing the accidents, a very satisfying task. At the end of a successful print we would spontaneously hug. I had never painted in

collaboration, but this went beyond collaboration. Renata was playing the destructive me while I was repairing the damage. She was also the “good mother” paying close attention to what I was doing and ready to give me a hand when I got in trouble.

The very last of these monoprints shows how, in working over the third version of an image, I begin to play with the idea of breaking the symmetry by deviations from it (Fig. 94). This seems to be a repeat of my experience with the Totem canvases and their grid and the Boulez Series when I was breaking the frame. There was a new interplay between the underlying fixed structure and the freedom of the new shapes emerging in opposition and away from the symmetry. I felt quite mischievous doing this and I anticipate that this will be my new direction. However, an artist friend of mine seeing this monoprint said: “That’s a mother with her children”, which brings to mind Hanna Segal’s remark (1991) in referring to the depressive position, “...one cannot restore a mother without restoring the whole family she is related to” (p.100)

Discussion

I have taken advantage of my dual role of subject and analyst in trying to understand the creative process. To counterbalance the limitations of such an approach, I have access to the best biographical source: myself. In this current paper I have somewhat limited myself to the descriptive elements in my painting which could visually relate to known objects. Naturally, a whole body of interpretation may deal with the non-representational, pictorial elements such as form and color which cannot be recognized as objects but have an importance of their own derived from the earlier connection with objects. As Freud noted at a meeting of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1909, “a content has, as a rule, its history, and that with regard to art one could properly say that art form is a *precipitate* of an older content” (my italics). For example, the overall approach throughout my work reflects the duality of chaos and

control. As you might have noticed, most of the paintings are made up of a general vague, undefined, fluid background against which more controlled and direct elements made out of lines, brush strokes or even deliberate areas devoid of color are interwoven. The latter, without necessarily representing identifiable objects, seem to reflect the need to control the object. My breaking the frame, as I have done in the Boulez Series and in the large Totem Series, may indicate the need to defy such control from the object. This interplay of forms is surely a *precipitate* of an older content. My fear of being controlled has to do with my own control of the object and the workings of projective identification that makes me feel controlled by it.

An important question was raised in an earlier paper of mine, "The Evolution of a Painting" (1983). Whether it was possible through artistic activity to reach new levels of integration of the personality without having to transform the feelings stirred up by the work into thoughts or everyday language. I was then struck by the mobility and successive alternation of images and colors that suggest power and destruction and those that suggest helplessness. I thought then that the painting served as a screen to argue for and against these competing sets of images. Opposite forces ended up standing side by side on the canvas being studied. My conclusion then was that "actual reconciliation of these opposites is carried out by other thought processes such as induction and logic" (p.17). In other words, I concluded that creating doesn't, in and off itself, produce integration but merely reflects whatever conflicts exist, with as much splitting, projection, denial, idealization as is present at the time in the artist's life. The perspective of time has allowed me to change this view as I have come to believe that opposites standing side by side constitute a form of integration. Staying with the work does also lead to integration even though, as artist Francois Gilot (In Oremland, 1997) has said, "works of art are traces of the artist's quest" (p.125). I hope that both the quest and my own development as an artist have become apparent in this retrospective. I seem to have moved from the expression of unmitigated attacks on the mother and the mother's body of

the earliest paintings to an appreciation of the mother's beauty, her relation to the father and to siblings in the later work. In one way or another all these latter motifs seem to appear as we get closer to my current work. The importance of the father has become more and more apparent in the latest paintings and, with it, the importance of the parental couple, allowed, just like the paintings, to have a life of their own. But was this change in my painting the result of painting alone? Or was it the result of my two analyses? I believe that these questions can be answered by recognizing that to face the truth about one's psychic life involves depressive pain and the willingness to endure it. How this shows up in the work is out of the artist's conscious mind. As Oremland (1997) puts it, art provides the meta-autobiography of the artist's subjective life of which the artist is only dimly aware or completely unaware...(p. xvi)". If the artist undergoes an analysis, however, the art is affected in unknown ways, but conceivably, will also reflect the patient's development. One could safely argue that both art and analysis support each other in promoting psychic development.

The efforts at integrating good and bad, love and hate in the later paintings do give the impression of growth and development insofar as they represent the movement from the paranoid schizoid to the depressive position (Segal, 1991). But during the progress of any given painting there is a fluctuation between these positions. In studying closely the evolution of several early paintings I have recognized four to five cycles of destruction and reparation in every painting examined (Safán-Gerard, 1983). Meltzer (1988) corroborates this observation when he states, "...if we say that the artist performs acts of reparation through his creativity we must recognize that in the creative process itself, phases of attack and phases of reparation exist in some sort of rhythmical relationship" (209). According to him there comes a point when mature artists achieve a sense of *stabilization* in their relationships to their own primal good objects in their inner world that leads to feelings of concern for 'all the mother's babies'. At this time the impulse to exhibit works of art has the function of what he calls *a sermon to siblings*. "...a sermon which is not only intended to show

what has been accomplished by this brother but is also intended to project into the siblings both the restored object as well as to project those capacities for the bearing of depressive pains which have been achieved by the artist in his own development” (219).

As I said at the beginning, destructiveness and reparation is the running thread in all these paintings. In her book *On Not Being Able to Paint*, Marion Milner (1950) analyses the all too common restrictions by which the creativity of the average adult is held in check. In her experiments with free drawings she tries to paint as the hand likes it, without much conscious control and discovers the aggression hidden in her inhibitions “...My mind was trying to tell about the angry attacking impulses that are an essential part of oneself, but the existence of which I had persistently tried to deny” (p. 41). When, for example, she allowed her hand to do as it pleased, a supposedly peaceful scene turned, to her surprise, into a raging fire. One is reminded once again of Sabina Spielrein’s seminal paper “Destructiveness as the Cause of Coming into Being” (1912) where, paradoxically, she sees destructiveness as an intrinsic part of all creation. It is important at this point to keep in mind the difference between the destructiveness the aim of which is to spoil and annihilate from the destructiveness that aims to create a new life. There is also the destructiveness of the object that fails to be ideal. This third kind is related to the artist’s narcissism in that he or she cannot accept the limits of idealization for any given painting.

The first kind of destructiveness, more related to envious attacks, finds its way into the content of my own paintings which has been especially illustrated by the abstract landscapes depicting the inside of the mother’s body where destruction and reparation become apparent. As for the second kind, perhaps the term “ruthlessness” best expresses what Spielrein means by destructiveness. This ruthlessness takes place in the creative process itself where destruction is carried out in the service of development. An example is

the grey washes over the surface of the monochromatic totems. This is the destructiveness Spielrein is talking about. She mentions the fact that many lower creatures, e.g. the May fly, forfeit their lives, in favor of new life. In her own life, Spielrein's letters to Jung and Freud (Carotenuto, 1980) demonstrate a unique effort in the history of psychoanalysis of someone using intellectual incisiveness to forge a synthesis, trying to help Freud and Jung to overcome their mutual destructiveness in order to bring their ideas together. The letters can also be seen as motivated by her reparative urge to bring about the reconciliation of the parental couple. In going through them one finds several instances of the *sermons to siblings* Meltzer writes about in that, like an artist with his or her work, she tries to project into them her own restored objects and her capacity to bear depressive pain. As for the third kind of destructiveness, the destruction of a painting that fails to achieve perfection, I can only say that there are many instances where I have had to painfully resign myself that a painting just finished didn't quite 'make it' and fight my impulse to destroy it.

The artist not only finds his or her way back to reality but in a way, he or she never leaves reality (Segal, 1991). However, with the exception of the artist that circumvents truth through a compulsion to idealize the work (Chasseguet-Smirguel, 1985), the artist primarily seeks psychic truth - getting in touch as deeply and truthfully to the contents of his or her mind - and this is therapeutic. The finished work has to be able to reveal this psychic truth, which means that, in showing the work, the artist leads the viewer into and out of the world of suffering. In order to carry out the work, he or she needs to allow that suffering. To quote Rickman (1940) "...unless the artist can reach down to the experience of deep anxiety and find the way out, his work will not give us a deeper understanding of ourselves or a fuller enjoyment of life...the work of art is a living proof that the artist has stayed the course of havoc and has himself made life come out of dust and confusion" (p.10). What is true for the artist is also true for the viewer. As Meltzer (1988) points out, "...the viewing of art is an expression particularly linked to the breast situation, that is, the feeling of

looking and listening to the events going on inside the mother, of seeing the intactness of her inner world, or conversely, of seeing the destruction that has been wrought there. It means an experience of allowing, in the first case, the introjecting of this goodness and intactness and, in the second case, exposing oneself to having destruction projected into one” (p. 216). His conclusion is that “...the experience of viewing art can be extremely taxing and extremely hazardous...” (p. 218) and I am most appreciative of your taking a chance with me.

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