

Book review

Chaos and Control: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Unfolding Creative Minds by Desy Safán-Gerard.

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Desy Safán-Gerard is a psychoanalyst and a painter. The book is replete with color plates of her paintings which illustrate her approach to working creatively. The images also help the reader to get a deep sense of who the author is and how she approaches a problem. The text is equally revealing and undefended. Safán-Gerard shares personal experiences, thoughts and feelings in a remarkably open way. As a psychoanalyst and artist, I wondered which part of my two lives this book would speak to. It turns out that it was the artist that she spoke to most eloquently. In part, because making art is an attempt to communicate silently, and it is unusual to read such a skillful verbalization of that unspoken process. Reading *Chaos and Control*, I identified with my artist self and thought about the challenges and failures in my own work.

There were elements of the text however, which returned me to my analyst self. Safán-Gerard makes use of an eclectic mix of theory in her analytic work and in her understanding of the creative process. She is centered around a Klein/Bion model but is in no way rejecting of Freudian and Relational tools for understanding creativity. I confess to some difficulty with Kleinian thinking. The “this means that” aspect makes for fascinating speculation and for a mystery novel thrill, but it strikes me as reifying in a way that is contrary to the wordlessness of visual art. Safán-Gerard’s existential approach to Bion’s “O” is a more useful way to integrate art and psychoanalysis. I find the Kleinian interpretations to interrupt the continuity of her imaginative integration. For me they have a cookie-cutter quality. You may well have a different experience.

Several themes recur throughout the book. One theme founded in a Kleinian viewpoint is the importance of the destructive impulse to creativity. This idea is well described and illustrated by Safán-Gerard. She references Sabina Spielrein’s paper; *Destructiveness as the Cause of Coming into Being*. This idea is central to the creative struggle; the work of making something new from something recognizable.

Another theme concerns the independence of the artwork from the artist. She cites Marion Milner’s focus on the artist’s dialogue with the external world via the artwork. Though she doesn’t specifically cite the concept of the Third, Safán-Gerard sees the artistic creation in those terms. Once begun, the artwork begins to dictate its will to the artist. While avoiding sinking into mystification, Safán-Gerard describes the function of the artist as not exactly in control of her creation. Indeed, submission to the chaotic primary process impulses is necessary to avoid making art that is essentially a narcissistic expression of conscious intentions. If the work is done ‘to’ the painting and not ‘with’ the painting she sees the work as narcissistic. The artist must continuously destroy and recreate her work in order to free herself from the conventional and the predictable.

Safán-Gerard sees this principle as essential also to creative work as a psychoanalyst. The analyst who operates too much from her own conscious intention, rather than allowing her patient constantly to reshape the analyst's understanding is in danger of doing harm. This calls to mind Winnicott's statement that he offers interpretations to show the patient the limits of his understanding. Safán-Gerard likens the analyst to the patron rather than the artist. She cautions that without this posture the analyst competes with her patient.

Safán-Gerard discusses the ideas of John Gedo and Jerome Oremland extensively. In treating artists, the analyst must assess whether her patient's thinking tends toward overcontrol or toward a lack of discrimination and judgment. Oremland is concerned with the possible negative effects on the patient's creativity from the analyst's minimizing the role of creativity in her own work. Safán-Gerard encourages her patients to 'experiment' with alternative ways of thinking and toward increasing tolerance of the chaos of not knowing.

Safán-Gerard addresses the importance of 'accidents' in creative work. She speaks of the need for a trusted teacher to encourage the working through of errors, dead-ends and outright failures rather than discarding them. In this way the creative work strengthens the artists capacity to live life creatively. She says:

A desire to control what happens on the canvas with a disregard for what the canvas says about it may be efficient but sterile... This will certainly become apparent to the viewer, who will not be touched or moved by it. There is no growth for the artist, or for the viewer, as a result of pseudo-creativity.

Accidents are seen by Safán-Gerard as a way of liberating ourselves from our own limitations. The resultant anxieties force us to give up our omnipotence and embrace the ambiguities that lead to creative growth. She describes several novel ways of inviting accidents in her work as a painter. One well illustrated section is devoted to work done with both hands simultaneously. Safán-Gerard sees her 'clumsy' left hand as actualizing unconscious elements while her conscious right hand reframes those elements more deliberately. She likens this process to free association and reflection in treatment.

Safán-Gerard turns next to creative blocks. Here she returns to the vital role of the destructive impulse. She invokes the infantile fear of the mother's retaliation as central in creative blocks. Inability to create results in primitive feelings of dependency which unbearable. In lengthy case studies, Safán-Gerard explores the similarity of therapeutic impasses and creative blocks. Her emphasis with both is to tolerate ambiguity, attack presuppositions and dig deeper into the affects blocking progress.

Safán-Gerard focuses revealingly on 'not knowing'. Here Bion's conceptualizations are central. Bion, I learned, was also a talented painter, though we aren't treated to seeing his work. Safán-Gerard discusses John Keats' concept of 'negative capability'; the ability to remain in a state of uncertainty. She sees 'waiting without expectation or inclination' in Freud's words, as an essential component of both painting and analyzing. 'Not knowing' must eventually be replaced by 'knowing' in order to bring a work (and presumably an analysis) to a conclusion.

Consideration of Bion's writings continues as Safán-Gerard takes on the tumultuous experiences of passion, madness and finding something to live for. She relates these phenomena to the capacity for attending, noticing and linking. Morris Eagle, she notes, has observed that "lack of interest is a negative

prognostic indicator” in therapy. Safán-Gerard goes on to discuss the connection between lack of interest in the world and narcissism, in both the patient and the analyst. The ebbing and flowing of passion in the analytic process is linked to awareness and examination of hateful affects. Safán-Gerard distinguishes quite usefully between passion and emotionality in several case vignettes. Another factor in the realm of passionate work is the capacity for ‘absorption’ in the process. Here she counsels as a way to foster passion, keen attention to whatever may interest the patient.

Some of Safán-Gerard’s approaches to both generating her own artwork and to teaching and training others are unique. She is quite interested in cross-modality experimentation. This begins with a description of interpreting the music she is inspired by while listening to it and painting simultaneously. Trained in music prior to her careers in painting and psychoanalysis, Safán-Gerard maintains a deep absorption in this world. She adds an additional step to the transformational process by using a model who moves in response to music while Safán-Gerard interprets her movement in paint. She presents these events publicly in conferences and conducts painting workshops where the participants are encouraged to utilize failures in their work to struggle through to a new successful transformation. Safán-Gerard holds ongoing workshop groups as part of her practice in Los Angeles. These groups encourage the participants’ associating to each artist’s work rather than criticizing from the standpoint of conventional ideas about composition and color balance. Participants experience building something new upon the wreckage of each of their failures. Safán-Gerard sees freedom as a central goal of both art and psychoanalysis.

Since there are numerous examples of Safán-Gerard’s artwork shown in quality color plates, one can fully understand and connect with the ideas she describes. While my initial response to her paintings was a skeptical one, I learned to relate to them in a very personal way through her open and personal revelation of her life, her vivid personality and her unconventional esthetic.

Part Two, the longer of the two sections is titled “My Development”. As indicated, the focus of the section is autobiographical but refers frequently to the ideas developed in Part One. The reader receives from the book a pedagogy akin to the experiential learning that occurs in clinical supervision or in observing an art teacher’s demonstration of a needed correction to one’s piece. The paintings shown in the second part become more accessible and visceral, rather than the more experimental and ideationally instigated ones shown in Part One. This may only be my response to the work. Every viewer of a painting responds in a unique way.

Creative work is not simply about producing an object for the benefit of others. Safán-Gerard quotes Aaron Copland; “I must create in order to know myself”. This function is important for the viewer’s full appreciation of and connection to a work of art. In speaking to herself, the artist becomes intimately known to the viewer.

Safán-Gerard tackles the thorny issue of beauty and it’s younger sibling; prettiness, and also deals with the emergence of unconscious elements in both their contribution and their detractor from the artwork. She sees the destructive force as a vital tool for transforming superficial appeal into more essential meaningfulness. In using this tool, ruthlessness becomes a necessary component of art, analysis and life. This ruthless destruction and regeneration is revealed in a series of images of the many stages in the completion of one painting. The decisions about failed areas, their correction and sometimes the subsequent mourning for the lost element are described in exquisite detail. In this process we witness the dialog between artwork and artist firsthand. I have never read such an accurate

replication in words of the mute experience of painting. The dreamlike state that the painter enters is glowingly recreated here. The greatest strength of this book is, for me, this synergy between the visual images and the text in invoking the very experience of painting. My mirror neurons fired, and it was as if I was holding Safán-Gerard's brush in my own hand.