

Hands and General Anxiety Disorder: Mindful Realizations of the Human Form

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Abstract

The series *Okay Or*, oil paints and additive textures on canvas, focuses on the interaction between hands and scenarios related to General Anxiety Disorder. While trying to ease the symptoms of General Anxiety Disorder through a focused meditation technique known as Mindful Awareness, the involvement of hands in moments of stress and depression became apparent. This series is a physical manifestation of the Mindful Awareness technique, because the tactile processes of mixing paints, texturing canvases, and putting brush to surface become meditative. To convey the detailed observance of Mindful Awareness, the scenes include either several viewpoints of the same moment or a selection of moments from a short span of time on multiple registers or canvases. Multiple panels also aid in enhancing qualities such as narrative, time, repetition, and visual rhythm.

1. Introduction

The intended subject matter for the series *Okay Or*, oil paints and additive textures on canvas, is the interaction between hands and different scenarios regarding General Anxiety Disorder. While trying to ease the symptoms of an anxiety disorder through a focused meditation technique known as Mindful Awareness, the role of hands in these moments of stress and depression became not only apparent but also important. Hands are complex characters with many emotive and expressive qualities and the ability to communicate almost as well as the human face. For example, hands are often tensed and clutching in moments of anxiety. Even when a person is not actively engaging his or her hands, these extremities still offer an abundance of complexity in form, shape, and non-verbal language. The expressive potential of hands became clear while using the technique of Mindful Awareness.

Mindful Awareness, or Mindfulness, is a type of cognitive therapy.¹ It is typically employed in a time of panic or depression to relieve the symptoms of these issues. The article "Treatment and Prevention of Depression" explains that it "draws on strategies from dialectic behavior therapy (acceptance and meditation) to help teach patients to distance themselves affectively from their depressive ruminations."² This type of meditation focuses more on how someone thinks and less on specific beliefs. When a person is more aware of the process of thinking and acting, he/she is more in control of the outcome. Ellen J. Langer describes the difference between being mindful and being mindless in her article "Mindful Learning." She states that when people are mindless they are "stuck in a single, rigid perspective, and [they] are oblivious to alternative ways of knowing."³ She goes on to say that when using Mindful Awareness "rules and routines may guide our behavior rather than predetermine it."⁴ In other words, Mindful Awareness is a way of becoming distinctly aware of a process of living or thinking in order to escape anxious or depressive ruminations. Creating art can be a method of Mindfulness, as the artist becomes distinctly aware of the creation of art and is relieved of anxious ruminations.

2. Work

Okay Or is a physical manifestation of the Mindful Awareness technique for two reasons. The first is that the scenes relate to times of anxiety and depression when a person would employ this meditation technique. Each set of paintings features either a direct representation or symbolic interpretation of such scenarios. For example “Sleep to Dream” (Fig. 1) was inspired by the hands’ total lack of movement during a bout of depressive sleep. The hands in this scene hang and droop onto the sheets or off of the bed. The practice of Mindfulness brings attention to the positioning of the body’s limbs, consequently making this lack of movement apparent. The second reason concerns the process of creating, or painting, as being a form of Mindful Awareness. While painting an artist focuses on the physical acts of mixing paints, building surfaces, sketching, or putting brush to canvas. For many this leads to a focus on the painting rather than the anxieties of the day. In this way, the painting process is meditative and employs the process of Mindfulness. Aspects of this painting process are used to convey the intended subject matter.



Fig. 1 hannah grace, 2012, “Sleep to Dream,” 48x48 inches; oil paints, crushed shells, sand, and paper towels on canvas.

The features of painting that support the subject matter of *Okay Or* include the elements and principles of art, the medium, and the format. Each is utilized to convey the interaction between hands and scenes of anxiety and depression. Focus on formal elements and principles such as texture, line, color, and composition will convey tone and a characterization of hands. For example harsh, left-leaning diagonal lines or warm, highly contrasted hues are utilized to build tension and anxiety for the viewer. The oil paints themselves also offer versatility for each work due to the variety of surface qualities possible. The use of this medium allows for either a smooth, graphic quality or a buildup of surface as well as expressive brushstrokes to convey the emotion of each scene. It is also possible to add any number of textures to the canvas prior to and during the process to create a dynamic surface quality. For *Okay Or* materials such as sand, corrugated cardboard, crushed sea shells, or paper were added to the surface of the works prior to the oil paint. The additions affect the application of paint, often forcing the painter to use thicker swaths of oil paint on covered areas. Thick paint application in turn leads to more visible art marks, or brushstrokes. Art marks lend a more expressive and dynamic quality to a painting by creating a more gestural use of form and line. Use of a palette knife to apply paint in conjunction with additive material also creates distinctive art marks and gestural form. These areas of thickly applied paint create a visible dichotomy with the areas of smooth, graphic

painting. The dialogue between such areas lends to a visual tension, or push and pull, which leads the viewer's eye around the surface of the canvas or panel. Adding a mixture of materials and making the hand(s) monumental in the composition will both emphasize the hands as the main characters and explore the materiality of oil paint.

The emphasis on the hands and materiality of oil paint are complemented by the format that is used. To convey the detailed observance of Mindful Awareness, the scenes include either several viewpoints of the same moment or a selection of moments from a short span of time on multiple registers or canvases. Multiple panels will also aid in enhancing qualities such as narrative, time, repetition, and visual rhythm. When a work features a series of canvases paired with distinct scenes it will suggest both the elements of narrative and time, as they tend to create more movement and space. This concept is apparent in "Sleep to Dream" and "These Ideas of Mine Percolate the Mind" (Fig. 2). Both of these paintings are intended to suggest multiple perspectives of a passing moment. Each panel shares qualities with the other paintings in the set, yet the hands are in various positions to suggest the passing of time. Other formats in *Okay Or*, such as "Doors Unlocked and Opened" (Fig 3), feature multiple canvases with overlapping and repeating images, emphasizing repetition and rhythm and intentionally eliminating clear ideas of time and space. This painting reads more as a single moment or thought. By pairing these formats with a conscious use of the formal elements and the medium of oil paint, a developed and engaging set of scenes emerges.



Fig. 2 hannah grace, 2012, "These Ideas of Mine Percolate the Mind," 30x48 inches; oil paints, wooden sticks, and sand on canvas.



Fig. 3 hannah grace, 2012, "Doors Unlocked and Opened," 36x36 inches; oil paint, cardboard, sand, crushed shell, and graphite on canvas.

The first set of paintings created for this series, "Sleep to Dream," (Fig. 1) relates these technical concepts to the idea of hands involved in scenes of anxiety and depression. It includes three canvases—a 24x48in canvas horizontally across the top, an 18x24in canvas vertically along the bottom left, and a 24x30in horizontally on the bottom right side. The intended effect of creating a multi-canvased and highly textured work is to implement the focused meditation of Mindful Awareness in a physical manner through the painting process while separate vantage points enhance the sense of narrative and time. The canvases were pre-textured using paper, sand, crushed sea shells, and gesso. A cool color palette enhances the depressive nature of the scene. This scene features the unmotivated physical and mental exhaustion that coincides with depression and anxiety disorders. A figure lies limp on her side on a crumpled bed with one hand nearly covering her face and the other hand dangling over the mattress. The top canvas features only the arms extended on the sheets from an aerial view. The second panel features a foreshortened hand hanging over the mattress edge. The third and final canvas is a frontal view of the figure's shoulders, head, and hand at mattress level. This scene illustrates that even with the absence of active engagement, a person's hands convey messages and remain complex. As the hands lay motionless on the sheets or hang wearily

over the edge of the mattress they still coil and curve, which provides multifaceted forms and shadows as well as interesting positive and negative space. In each register, the hands are conveyed as the main characters and vehicles of expression.

3. Influences

Other artists, such as Kathryn Jacobi, have used this method of conveying tone as well. Kathryn Jacobi implements hands as a means of expression in her figurative paintings. These are oil paintings on panel as well. Her *Habaniera* series focuses on the upper half of the body—mainly the face, arms, and hands—of a single female figure. She employs heightened contrast and strong line to intensify emotion; however, the positioning of the arms and hands seems to have the most effect on the tone of the portraits. The character remains the same throughout the series, but in each painting she changes position and posture. While there is a majority of the figure shown, the hands play the key role in these works. Jacobi accomplishes this by using a more painterly style on the hands and fingers to create focus and interest.

The way in which she uses the material and color on these areas creates a visual rhythm and movement as well. In “Habaniera #13” (Fig. 4), Jacobi paints the palm of the hand extending toward the viewer in deep alizarins and violets with shapes of paint that mimic the forms of the adjacent arm. The viewer is drawn to these deep hues and the eye is then pulled around the painting into the other hand and forearm. In “#13” she has the arms and hands extend into the viewer’s space as if reaching out for them, the effect of which is to exude a longing and sadness when paired with the single-figure composition, high contrast palette, and flowing strokes of paint. Other works have the hands receding into the depth of the painting, such as “Habaniera #11” (Fig. 5). In this the hands are pulled to the figure’s chest with palms facing inward and fingers tensed in a sign of agony. While the facial expressions are also rendered with intent and expression, the hands of this series could stand alone in displaying the particular emotions. When cropped to show only the hands and arms, these paintings are still capable of conveying the same sense of anxiety or longing.



Fig. 4 Kathryn Jacobi,
“Habaniera #13,” 12x18 inches,
oil on panel.



Fig. 5 Kathryn Jacobi, “Habaniera #11,”
12x18 inches, oil on panel

Other portrait and figure artists depict hands in interesting and meaningful ways throughout the history of art. While hands may not be the focus of the works of Caravaggio and Degas, the painters employ this portion of the figure as a vehicle of conveying meaning or upholding tenants of each respective stylistic movement. *Okay Or* will seek to accomplish this as well by using hands as an expressive means for conveying an anxious or depressive tone and a narrative. Caravaggio’s “Conversion of Saint Paul” exemplifies the main characteristics of Baroque

artwork—drama, emotion, bold contrast, action, and narrative (Fig. 6). The figure's hands are an important aspect of the drama, action, and narrative in this work. As the figure sprawls in the foreground of the painting, his tensed hands reach wide in a sign of desperation or surprise. Caravaggio is renowned for his ability to direct the viewer's attention, particularly noticeable in "Conversion" with the bold contrast created in the hands that draws the eye around the composition. Caravaggio accomplishes this contrast with chiaroscuro, or simply put, with a use of a strong light source contrasting an extremely dark environment. Here, hands are utilized as a tool for composition and drama. His works often have an unsettling tone to them, an effect which relates them to *Okay Or*. Writer Martin Gayford describes the artist's works as having the air of a "film noir."⁵ Achieving such a dramatic tone in *Okay Or* complements the subject matter and materiality. Other works by Caravaggio, such as "Judith Beheading Holofernes" or "David with the Head of Goliath," make use of hands as a point of action. In these works the characters' deeds are being carried out specifically by their hands. In "Judith Beheading" this refers to the woman slicing the man's throat (Fig. 7). There are also other hands employed to convey emotion here as well such as the other woman grabbing at Judith's dress or Holofernes grasping desperately at the cloth beneath him. In the case of "David with the Head of Goliath," the boy both holds the weapon and the prize in his hands as he showcases his act (Fig. 8).



Fig. 6 Caravaggio, 1600-01, "Conversion of Saint Paul," 230x175cm; oil on canvas.



Fig. 7 Caravaggio, "Judith Beheading Holofernes"; 1597-98; 145x195cm; oil on canvas.



Fig. 8 Caravaggio, "David with the Head of Goliath"; 1605; 90.5x116cm; oil on poplar wood.

Edgar Degas' use of hands also stands out. In his work "Ballet Dancers on the Stage," the Impressionist pulls the viewer through the work with loose art marks and also a composition full of tangled arms and hands (Fig. 9). These arms leave a distinct impression of movement and create a strong diagonal across the picture plane. The dainty gestures of the hands also give a sense of femininity to the dancers. An article about Degas's work "Dancer" explains the artist's use of cropping limbs to pull the viewer into the scene: "By noting the cropping of the foreground ballerinas' limbs, he also underscored the startling proximity of these figures to the viewer."⁶ Like Caravaggio, Degas often employs hands to direct the viewer to the point of action. For example in "Woman Combing Her Hair" the woman's hands are pulling at her hair and brushing it (Fig. 10). Or in "Dancer (Danseuse)" the woman's hands pull at the back of her neck while she stretches, which is the main action of the work. These two artists—Caravaggio and Degas—commonly used hands as a tool for directing action and tone in their works.

"Shut Up and Carry On" from *Okay Or* (Fig. 11) draws from this notion of directing action and tone via the hands. The concept of this polyptych stems from the act of hiding symptoms of General Anxiety Disorder from the outside world. Many people suffering from this disorder prefer to internalize their anguish to keep from dealing with reactions and intrusions of others. In "Shut Up and Carry On," the figure is physically constructing her appearance in a mirror. Her hands manipulate pencils, paintbrushes, needle and thread, and an eraser as a means to create a calm, collected exterior. The idea arose from practicing Mindfulness during everyday processes. Mindfulness revealed that the simple act of getting dressed involved covering up consequences of General Anxiety Disorder—tears, under-eye circles, weary expressions. The figure approaches the viewer as if they were the mirror, which creates a feeling of vulnerability. "Shut Up and Carry On" deals more in abstract concepts than literal actions, yet it

still stems from a very real situation dealing with anxiety disorders. The hands constructing the figure reference the feeling of deception and internalization that come along with the decline from a manic anxious high to a hopeless depressive low. Large expanses of dripping turpentine washes paired with both a sickly pthalo bluegreen color palette and left-shifting compositions add to the melancholy, unsettling tone of the painting. These manipulations of color and composition also pull from the ideas of Caravaggio and Degas. They also utilized their medium to create tone and emotion.

Oil paint will not only provide this opportunity to convey tone and emotion in *Okay Or* but they will also incorporate the process of Mindful Awareness. This medium allows for the building of various layers and textures, a method which requires focused attention and exploration of options. The meditative process of painting also comes from this exploration of materials. Actively exploring these options has a similar effect to practicing Mindful Awareness. Being focused on researching and trying new methods of painting is often as meditative as putting the brush to canvas or practicing standard Mindful Awareness.



Fig. 9 Edgar Degas, “Ballet Dancers on the Stage”; 1883; 24.5x19 inches; pastel on paper.



Fig. 10 Edgar Degas, “Woman Combing Her Hair”; 1888-90; 24 1/8 x 18 1/8 inches; pastel on paper.



Fig. 11 Hannah Grace, “Shut Up and Carry On”; 2012-2013; 72x108 inches; Oil paints on panel.

While exploring ways to utilize the medium of paint, the creation of grid-like tile portraits aided in focusing more on material than subject matter. I used a view finder to single out a solitary square of a gridded reference photo and covered the rest as that portion was painted. Instead of working on a single sheet of paper, I painted onto 2x2 inch tiles and then placed these all together in order at the end of the project. This forced a focus on each individual square as line, value, and shape rather than a section of hair or an eye. As a result the tiles of the reference photo become abstract images which free the artist to explore the material without the distraction of recognizable features. The end result of this method is actually a highly realistic depiction of the reference photo. At the time, images of Chuck Close's work strongly influenced these studies. After further research about Close's methods, it became clear that his intentions and my own were very different; however, there are aspects of Close's art that positively affected *Okay Or*.

While researching Chuck Close, it became clear that many of his goals and successes are aligned with some of my technical aspirations as a painter. A 1980 *Artnews* article describes an argument over whether Close is a Realist or a Modernist. The author concludes that while Close is an "accurate" painter, he is not a Realist by the traditional definition. Instead, the painter is dubbed a "Reductivist," because he "[reduces] that which he perceives and senses to that which can be reproduced by his chosen process."⁷ In this way the process of his painting becomes clear to the viewer, and a painterly quality is maintained. Similarly, one goal of *Okay Or* is to describe expressively, as well as naturalistically, the subject while maintaining a sense of the chosen process.

An article from an *Arts* periodical mentioned another aspect of Chuck Close's art that has influenced *Okay Or*. This is what the author described as "the sign of a real painter."⁸ This sign is "the way the image falls apart on closer inspection and tightens up again as you back away." While working to utilize materials, *Okay Or* also strives to see the subjects depicted as shape, color, and form to more effectively create a complete image and to push the work past the "study" phase. This focus on materiality will hopefully give a greater depth and presence to the paintings.

Like Close, Jason Shawn Alexander is an artist whose materiality and process correlate to the *Okay Or* series. His 106x70 inch oil and mixed media painting titled "Larger in Life" (Fig. 12) displays the history of his painting process. This split format painting has a monumental central figure that transitions from a naturalistic rendering at the top of the canvas to a deteriorated or partially sketched rendering at the bottom. Alexander often leaves areas of his works less developed or focused. There are thick swaths of paint in certain areas and big drips of paint in others, lending a dynamic quality to the work overall. These aspects of his process are apparent in several works in *Okay Or*. For example, both "Shut Up and Carry On" and "Doors Unlocked and Opened" show traces of the graphite sketches and dripping underpaintings that juxtapose other areas of thick paint or brushstrokes. By developing areas in the paintings to different degrees the artist creates a tension, or push-and-pull, within the work. Such a tension lends itself to the anxious theme of *Okay Or*.



Fig. 12 Jason Shawn Alexander, "Larger in Life"; 2012; 106x70 inches; oil and mixed media on canvas.

4. Conclusion

Aspects of each of these artists—Alexander, Close, Degas, Caravaggio, and Jacobi—are implemented in *Okay Or*. Some of these are visible to the viewer and some simply influence the way I work or view my own paintings. For instance, the dripping paint and brushstrokes of Jason Shawn Alexander and the high contrast and anxiety of Caravaggio have a direct visual influence on my series. The influence of Chuck Close, however, may be less apparent as it affects my mindset and methods more than my subject matter and painting style. As *Okay Or* progressed, my ability to remain Mindful while painting improved and has had an obvious effect on the outcome of the series. Anxiety previously made me too self-conscious and timid to try new or uncertain methods. When I am able to push negative ruminations to the side through Mindful Awareness, I am capable of freely expressing myself through the medium of paint. By using my own anxiety as subject matter in many of these paintings, I was also able to confront issues with anxiety and depression. I plan to use the knowledge gained in creating *Okay Or* to create more highly emotional and dynamic pieces in the future.

3. Endnotes

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