

## Is Mysticism Where Art, Science and Religion Meet?

### Interview with Richard Stodart

interviewed by Nancy Stodart

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**Nancy:** *I'm Nancy Stodart and I'll be speaking with my husband, Richard Stodart, a self-taught artist from Trinidad, West Indies, about his art in the context of the theme "Is mysticism where science, art, and religion meet?" Thank you, Bart and Marjorie for inviting us to this discussion.*

*Richard has a Fine Arts degree from Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada, has won a Canada Council Grant for a figurative series of paintings on the dynamic of the self and presence, and has exhibited in the US and Canada. For more than 40 years, he has engaged in study of the self and does so today in the context of nonduality in the realizational/dynamic perspective of Soto Zen Buddhist teachings.*

**Nancy:** *Welcome, Richard.*

**Richard:** Thank you, it's good to be with you.

**Nancy:** *For the past 47 years, you've been working with painting as a way of studying the self. Can you tell us why you made the choice to study the self as your vocation with painting?*

**Richard:** I wanted to close a gap I felt between form and presence, which had troubled me since early childhood. Rembrandt, Malcolm Batty, Alberto Giacometti, Willem de Kooning, Amadeo Modigliani, and Francis Bacon were influential in this decision. My early works, such as *Blue Nun*, *Blue Clown*, *Freda*, and *The Park Bench*, were semi-abstract. My work today is mostly abstract, which allows me to express the permeability of attention and awareness in their discontinuous continuity. No gap, so to speak.

**Nancy:** *After painting 'The Park Bench', you took a break from painting before resuming again, this time in the context of Hinduism. Why?*

**Richard:** I had had an out-of-body experience after painting *The Park Bench*, for which I needed an explanation. This led me to a Hindu-based form of practice I engaged until 1985.

**Nancy:** *About then, a shift occurs in your work to the archetypal realm.*

**Richard:** The archetypal realm is one of unspeakable equality and interdependence. So it was always my interest. Works such as *Of An Ancient Civilization*, *Friends*, *Only For Happiness*, and *Kahuna* were magical expressions of male and female archetypal power. This work was served by Kabbalistic, Taoist, and Shamanic teachings.

**Nancy:** *How does the archetypal realm factor in your Tibetan Buddhist period of work?*

**Richard:** In the Mahayana Dzogchen Tibetan teachings I studied in 1988 with Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche and Ngakpa Chogyam, the liberating *dakini* or sky dancer nullifies objects upon their arising of self-essence. While exploring the Dzogchen form of practice with Ngakpa Chogyam, an English-born Lama whom we invited to teach in the US in the late eighties, I painted *Sky Dancer*. In the painting, a headless *dakini* dances in a maelstrom of primal forces.

**Nancy:** *In 1990, you took up the grid. What prompted this decision?*

**Richard:** Barnett Newman's "Stations of the Cross" was influential in prompting me to express the story of a Taoist transmission of nonduality, in a series called "Free and Easy Wandering." In the story, a monkey and a sage meet and go on a journey that begins in isolation and ends in nonduality. Since Ad Rhinehart and Ellsworth Kelly had found a way using the grid structure to tease out luminous works of the symbolized, I felt that the grid might also serve this end with the story. While working on the series, I also completed four paintings I call the "Immortals", which became touchstones for a meditative practice. Upon completion of the series, I painted *Black Butterfly II*, to express Malkuth as Keter in the Kabbalistic Tree of Life.

**Nancy:** *What inspired this?*

**Richard:** In 1995, attention relaxed from any urge to be transcend itself in awareness. Attention and awareness simply *moved* together without resistance. I wanted to express this freedom in a painting. In *Black Butterfly II*, the black butterfly is a symbol for self-expressive responsive, sensual, intuitive, and logical thought functioning optimally with awareness. In this respect, I made the symbol of the butterfly as attention and the black dot as symbolized awareness equal in size, to express the ineffability of Malkuth as inexpressible Keter.

**Nancy:** *In 2005, you returned to the grid. What prompted this?*

**Richard:** A painting project called "DreamMaking", in which I tried to express the nondual realizational/dynamic of delusion and enlightenment in Dogen's Zen. The reflexive action of the grid is centripetal and centrifugal. As such, I felt the grid would serve my exploration of attention and awareness, thinking and not-thinking in dream-expounding/making, as a cofocal dynamic of reflexivity. *The Steelyard, Enwined Vines, As One Side is Illumined..., Enso, and Affirmation*, are some examples. In the process, I also wrote a book called *DreamMaking: the Intimacy of Picture/Reality*, based on excerpts from *Dogen On Meditation and Thinking* by emeritus scholar, Hee-Jin Kim.

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**Nancy:** *Mysticism is usually defined as the process of union with the absolute through contemplation and self-surrender. Can you say how the nondual realizational/dynamic perspective in Dogen's Zen differs*

*from the mystical perspective?*

**Richard:** In the mystical perspective, when the self is fully in union with the absolute through self-surrender, responsive, sensual, intuitive, and logical dimensions of thought function optimally as differentiation. The same holds true for the temporal realizational/dynamic perspective, in which existence is time and time is existence. In the temporal dynamic, responsive, logical, intuitive, and sensual dimensions of thought function inseparably as attention when attention nondually conjoins in equilibrium with awareness or not-thinking, in and through emptiness as the nonthinking mediator of attention and awareness.

Because of a tendency in both perspectives to bifurcate between the absolute as imperishable, "what really is", and the self as perishable, "what appears to be", the responsive, logical, and intuitive dimensions of thought, in my opinion, tend also to exclude or suppress the sensual dimension of thought. This devitalizes attention and awareness, with negative consequences for clear discriminative thought. This is evident in art, science, and religion, whenever dimensional thought is devitalized.

**Nancy:** *It seems that emptiness is the pivot in the nondual realizational view you engage that allows thought to function as a whole.*

**Richard:** In my understanding, emptiness simply denotes the absence of self-essence in attention and awareness. Without a transformative mediator in attention and awareness, there are places that cannot be reached. In the realizational/dynamic perspective, emptiness is the mediator of attention and awareness. As such, emptiness allows thought to function with its limiting and liberating functions.

**Nancy:** *How does attention and awareness function through emptiness?*

**Richard:** In essence, attention holds awareness. Simultaneously, awareness moves to and illuminates attention. Their nondual dynamic is one of co-temporal equilibrium.

**Nancy:** *Early in your retrospective, The Someone In Painting/A Picture, you identify form and presence as the circle and the arrow. Can you say more about this in the context of awareness and attention?*

When I worked with form and presence as a process of unity and self-transcendence, I designated form as "the circle" and presence as "the arrow". A gap existed between them, however, which was seemingly impossible to close. At least, I never managed it. Now, in the realizational/dynamic of nondual existence-time, in which no gap is presumed, I work with the circle as "the embodying body" of thinking or attention,

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and with the arrow as "the full round moon shape" of not-thinking or awareness. Circle and arrow conjoin as permeable foci of quest and realization, in and through emptiness, in an ongoing dialogue of attention-in-awareness and awareness-in-attention.

**Nancy:** *How do the circle and arrow function in the painting process?*

**Richard:** The arrow illuminates and penetrates the circle, rooting out unconscious abstractions that interrupt expressive activity in the process. On the other hand, the circle holds awareness as the illuminating arrow. In the process, the arrow reminds the circle to pause with the event before expounding and naming it. In other words, it reminds the circle to remain open to all that is arising with full awareness.

**Nancy:** *How does this process relate to the painting experience?*

**Richard:** In the painting-a-picture experience, random impulses and thoughts constantly churn with sudden gain or loss of mass in the embodying body of the circle. My task is to weigh these impulses and thoughts from low unspeakable to high variable order of expressive activity with the awareness of the arrow. To serve this embodying process, I use the mediums of acrylics, pencil, pastels, tempera, and charcoal, in the push and pull of the circle with the mindful arrow: doing nothing, in and through right thinking/nonthinking, the nondoing custodian of emptiness. In this respect, nonthinking introduces a mediating pause of nondoing that signals the limiting and liberating functions in thinking to conjoin and embody the whole.

**Nancy:** *What is your bodily experience while painting?*

**Richard:** My field of perception widens and deepens with sentient spacious energy. Time seems to slow and stretch as well, and paint has the alchemical quality of light animating the symbol as the symbolized.

**Nancy:** *Has this been always been your experience?*

**Richard:** Yes, which is why I trust the process of painting-a-picture and the liberating function in thinking. When this function is awakened, attention naturally conjoins with awareness .

**Nancy:** *You seem to have a keen interest in the body. Did you study or do any body-work ?*

**Richard:** In 1983 while painting *The Transfiguration of Christ*, I had Rolfing sessions, and Hellerwork sessions a little later. Both modalities helped free my body of traumas lodged there by serious childhood accidents and reactive emotions. In addition to drawing the body from life, I spent long hours analyzing the structure of the body, so I have a good eye for when a body is in equilibrium with balanced and proportional length and width. It's likely I might have entered the field of body-work had I not become a painter.

**Nancy:** *Have you continued this exploration along with painting?*

**Richard:** I'm currently exploring the "use of the self" in the Alexander Technique, by F.M. Alexander, and enjoying its synergetic ties with the consciousness of abstracting and realizational/dynamic Zen praxis. I'm also completing a book, "Radiant Light Embodying", selected *Shobogenzo* writings in stanza form. As for painting, I am continuing my humble study of the self and making a dream of the whole body-mind as best I can.

**Nancy:** *Thank you for sharing this.*

**Richard:** It's been a pleasure.

**Nancy:** *If anyone would like to see and read more on Richard Stodart's work, three books on his work are available through bookstores and Amazon: Free and Easy Wandering: Markings On The Way, DreamMaking: The Intimacy of Picture/Reality, and The Someone In Painting/A Picture, a retrospective of his paintings, drawings, and reflections on nonduality, from 1973 to 2014.*

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