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Introduction

For this essay I will be discussing a minimum of three key words that have influence on, or relevance to my own artistic practice. These three keywords can have a visual, emotional, physical, or spiritual relation to my work and are entirely at my own discretion. There are many possibilities with this task as I could choose any three words that have a broad or specific definition. The words I have chosen are as follow: pattern/ symmetry, mandala and tattoo art. Each of these words having a direct relation to one-another, especially when viewing my art practice. I chose to place symmetry and pattern in the same category of keyword, because of how similar they are, and they do interlock with each other, in and out of my own art. The two words do have different definitions and so I could not just choose one or the other. For each keyword, I will discuss a more specific topic for context in depth. The aim of this essay is to develop a question from the path of research I have taken.

Keyword 1

Pattern/ Symmetry:

The word pattern is one with many alternate meanings. (dictionary.cambridge.org, n.d.) It can refer to repeating visual, factual or coincidental occurrences. Patterns are found in every aspect of life; humans are programmed to recognise patterns consciously and sub-consciously. It's how we code technology, conclude scientific or mathematical equations, communicate and diagnose/ treat medical issues. Patterns serve a purpose, the ability to recognise reoccurring outcomes to situations, is what led humans to evolve to the extent that we have.

Physical and visual patterns serve infinite purposes in nature and art alike. In art, patterns are typically used to visually stimulate your mind and produce a feeling of satisfaction and expectance. You know what is coming next and it can become satisfying, or even boring and repetitive. Patterns are also used by humans as a form of protection, by creating camouflages such as UCP, MTP and OCP to use in a variety of terrains. (www.military1st.co.uk, n.d.) Using this information, you are able to alter your impact on an audience with various methods of pattern applications. Even disturbing a pattern, to make a piece off-putting or to create an optical illusion. When parts of a pattern are different from the rest, this will typically be uncomfortable or less aesthetically pleasing to look at. In math or geometry when a pattern is off, your outcome is incorrect. In art this can just be considered a part of the process, experimentation, developing outcomes and impact. For animals or insects, it can be the difference between life or death.

In nature, patterns are used by both insects and animals to ward off predators. For insects such as butterflies, a subject I have frequented recently in other aspects of my researching. This method of defence succeeds, because it tricks predators into thinking that it's a bigger predator than it is in reality. The designs can cause its wings to look like it's face. Multiple species of moths and butterflies are known to have eye spots symmetrically placed on their wings. Including the South American Owl butterflies and Io moths. (Osterloff, n.d.) In particular, monarch butterflies are known to be potentially life-threatening to various bird species and other small animals. This is due to their consumption of milkweed as larvae, a plant which contains cardiac glycosides, a toxin deadly to animals and humans if consumed in large quantities. (Leibach, 2013) The bright orange wings of a monarch, act as an indicator to birds that they aren't to be eaten and deters them from being targeted. This has been a lesson birds have learned through evolution and recognising the outcome of consuming one of these insects, as being deadly. Therefore, avoiding them all-together through association to their visual patterns such as shape and colour. This is a defence mechanism which is known as aposematism, can appear visually or by other senses such as smell or taste. (Taylor, 2020) (www.merriam-webster.com, n.d.) Some insects have patterns that can present in different ways, or asymmetrically- such as the ladybug. Some ladybugs have odd amounts of spots or sometimes even stripes. (Trust, 2021) Occasionally ladybugs will have no patterns at all. This lack of patterns can be of interest to humans and makes us want to understand why there is this disturbance of a pattern consistently found in nature, as humans we need an answer to all questions, and we like to maintain consistency.

Patterns do not necessarily have to be symmetrical, although they can be. Symmetry, however, does require some level of pattern and reoccurrence. The most efficient way to describe the difference between the two, is that patterns are made from any form of repetition (colour, shapes, spacing...). Whereas symmetry is repetition of a pattern at every available angle (two or more). Pattern and symmetry are both relevant and present through my artwork. The very use of it is the foundation of my practice. Taking inspiration from natural formations such as leaves, flowers and other plants, prints, animals or shapes. The way I implicate these shapes into symmetry creates the effect of a mandala.

Keyword 2: Mandala

The mandala is spiritually known as a symbol of the never-ending universe, the layers to it and turning it into something beautiful as opposed to something vast and scary. Tibetan Buddhists practice the use of three types of mandalas, the healing, the teaching and the sand. (Blume, n.d.) Some of these methods can be interlocked and used at the same time. Teaching mandalas are associated with religious, spiritual and philosophical teachings. Healing mandalas are used to bring healing and purification. Sand mandalas are traditionally created with crushed, coloured stones, such as marble, jade and malachite. The more recent and more easily accessible substitute sands used today, are required to be denser than normal and so are made from marble. (www.youtube.com, 2016) This is in order to avoid disturbances from wind, movement or human interactions (breathing, sneezing and bumps, for example). Sand mandalas are usually used alongside healing techniques, by chanting and/ or praying while it's being created. A minimum of two– four Tibetan Buddhist monks will perform this practice, one at each angle of the pattern because of the size of the pieces and the time it takes to create them. (www.youtube.com, 2014). These mandalas usually have lots of colour, ornate lines, lotus or Buddha at the centre, square and/or circular patterns. The tools used in this practice are called a Chak-pur, they work as a funnel for the sand with ridges along the sides, which vibrate when scraped with a stick, shifting the sand through the tube in a controlled manner. (Tibetan Spirit, n.d.) A drawn template is used to ensure accuracy of the patterns at each angle, from each person making it. They will contain different symbols depending on what deity is being called upon, in accordance with a desired outcome. Once complete, the sand is then brushed into a pile as closure of the ritual and a reminder of life's impermanence. (Chow, 2016) Sand mandala rituals are performed for a multitude of reasons including healing, cleansing or maintaining peace and love. Other types of mandalas created by Buddhists are mosaics, tiles, textiles, temples, alter and offering spaces. (Enlightenment Thangka, n.d.) This is an art form that must be taught by Tibetan monks, in monasteries, for multiple years before others are allowed true involvement. It seems visually, to be a very tedious yet calming task that required a steady hand and an abundance of patience.

In Buddhist architecture, buildings such as temples could be considered as 3D mandalas. The birds-eye-view of most of these types of structures found across Asia, reflect a mandala through the symmetry and pattern (as previously mentioned). One that particularly attracts many tourists and pilgrims each year, an infamous structure that reflects my statement perfectly, is the Borobudur temple. (borobudurpark.com, 2022) Located in Central Java, Indonesia, surrounded by volcanoes, which are still active to this day. It is important to note there is no known exact origin of this temple, due to a lack of scriptures or identification inscribed anywhere. Based upon other temples and structures located on the island, it is believed to have been built through C. 800-900AD, during the Shailendra Dynasty. (Centre, n.d.) Throughout the grounds there is a total of 504 Buddha statues entirely made of stone, leading expert historians to believe it was most likely a site built as an offering to Buddha, or a place where one could access a path to Nirvana (a Buddhist belief of divine enlightenment, peace and nothingness after death), by having walked several times in a clockwise direction by the time you reach the top stupa. When viewing this temple (and others on the island) it is very apparent how symmetrical they all are, especially when viewed from above. The base of the temple is a thick stone step raised above the ground. On the face of each wall there are steps perfectly situated the exact same at each side. Every set of steps indents, just slightly more than the last toward the centre, while also raising higher and higher. Leading to a circular centre platform at the top, which has other circular structures protruding from the ground, each on a platform that also raises the closer to the centre it is.

In my own practice I have used many methods and materials to create mandalas. Including measurements by hand, tracing, digital designs, paint, ink and in a variety of scales. I take inspiration from colours and some visual patterns or symbols, specifically amongst Buddhist but also Hindu designs. Although never worshipping any deities, I have attended multiple temples and sites across Thailand and Indonesia. Each providing a new perspective on the use of art within spirituality, life and death, and the afterlife.

Keyword 3: Tattoo Art

Tattoo art is one of three keywords I have chosen that connects to my practice in many ways. There have been various styles of tattoo art throughout history that are ever evolving including: traditional, neo-traditional, fine-line, tribal, black work and mandala- to name a few. Tattoos are unavoidable at this point in the 21st century, whether you are for or against them- you will be exposed to them almost every day in public or online, regardless of your own personal opinions. There is a huge supply and demand surrounding every aspect of tattoos. From the creation of supplies that are used for it, to the lust for apprenticeships and job positions. I do consider my work to be highly influenced by tattoo design and working practices. Including, the design, application and material methods. Over years of spectating, research and a deep interest from a very young age, I gained knowledge regarding the way that tattoos are constructed, designed and later applied to the skin. Also including research into the deep rooted and rich histories within almost every culture on earth. Including no known, singular origin of tattoos or tattooing practices around the globe. Humans have always found a way to provide and make tattoos in various forms over the centuries, even at sea. There are roughly 3516 registered tattoo artists in Wales today, with over 3000 legitimate tattooists and 1800 businesses across the country as of 2023. (www.gov.wales, 2023) Wales was the first country in the UK to introduce the mandatory licenses for tattoo artists, by way of controlling hygiene and safety regulations regarding body modifications. This fell under the Public Health (Wales) Act 2017, ([Public Health \(Wales\) Act 2017. Part 4.](#)) and a previous legislation protecting minors from underage tattooing fell under The Tattooing of Minors Act 1969 (this was not passed in Northern Ireland until as late as 1979). ([Tattooing Of Minors Act 1969](#))

There is a differentiation between tattoo designing, the art outcome and standard drawings. The main difference I find to be the most evident, is that tattoo designs are made to react with skin and its own defensive or healing strategies, including the effects of aging over time. (skin sagging, ink and lines bleeding into the sub-dermal layer of skin or ink breaking down by the body). This happens most commonly with colours or white pigments fading completely, the body continues to try and break the ink down overtime as it is a foreign object within the body. When drawing on paper there is no pressure to do things in any particular manner, nor fear of mistakes as it can be whatever you want it to be, most importantly it can always be re done on paper. When designing tattoos for other people, they also need to be happy with it permanently embedded into their skin, adding pressure to get it as accurate as possible. The designing process requires distinctive lines that won't fade over time, or bleed together and seep under the skin.

As previously mentioned, I have taken a lot of inspiration from the way tattoo artists design, prepare and apply their artwork to their canvas. Which makes it relevant to my current practice. This includes for example, using apps such as Procreate to achieve perfectly symmetrical lines or other shapes and exact angles (radial vs quadrilateral). Using this digital design as a stencil to draw over once printed, with an array of materials. Most frequently different inks or paints. This leads to the biggest difference, being the method of application. I will most commonly use fine liner ink pens and alternate the tip sizes, which can be anywhere from 0.1mm to 10mm. Similarly to the needle sizes used when applying tattoos. At other times I may use the end of a paintbrush dipped in paint, for bolder lines or to achieve the dot shading formation.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay I have discussed different ways I take Inspiration from each keyword. There are evident themes in my artwork from natural formations such as insects, plants and tattooing techniques. Another underlying theme throughout my artwork and this essay, is patterns and colour being used as a form of body armour by a range of beings. In animals this is by nature and in humans this is an artistic and historical choice.

Is art a defence mechanism? Do we use it as a form of protection and decoration like the butterfly?

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