Breath of Bamboo

by

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Introduction

Photographing bamboo is like to returning to the breath in meditation and becoming fully present in the moment. It is my acknowledgement of a certain presence in the landscape that adds structure, stability, and continuity to the endless possibilities of using nature for artistic and spiritual expression. It has been my intention to combine the two, art and spirituality, since I began my graduate studies. I have explored both black and white studio photography and color landscape photography as options for expressing my interests in art and spirituality, but I ultimately chose to concentrate on color photographs of bamboo for my thesis exhibition. It was a challenge to find variety within such a limited subject matter, but through deep exploration of myself and my surroundings, I was able to complete a body of work that addresses not only my personal interest in art and spirituality, but also relates to global issues of politics, economics and the environment.

Early Work

My first attempt at expressing my spiritual influences involved using conch shells photographed in a variety of studio arrangements. I chose the conch shell because it is a natural form, and it is one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols in Tibetan Buddhism. I am not a Tibetan Buddhist, but I have been practicing Soto Zen Buddhism since 2004, and I am interested in the religious art of all schools of Buddhism. The conch is a symbol for the Dharma, which is a Sanskrit word for the teachings of the Buddha. The conch was also chosen because of its spiral structure, which is a representation of the Fibonacci Sequence, a mathematical
formula that governs the growth process of certain plants and animals. This number is also called The Golden Ratio, which was used as a guideline to determine perfect proportion in architecture and art as early as the time of the ancient Greeks. Many artists have been inspired to study natural forms, and one in particular who inspired the study of conch shells, was Karl Blossfeldt. He combined his interest in science, nature, and photography with his black and white, botanical photographs to show the beauty of form and symmetry in nature.

One of my first experiments with the conch shells involved making double exposures of the right and left side of the same conch. Almost all living creatures are symmetrical along their vertical axis. The conch shell does not appear to be symmetrical, but the creature inside is. The double exposures were an exercise in making the invisible visible and an expression of the concept of duality. The conchs were two sides of the same object, which was an attempt at visually representing the Buddhist concept of duality and non-duality. Eventually the organic shells were used to create geometric shapes that were stacked in six separate units to form a column. The combination of organic and geometric shapes was another effort to express duality by combining opposites, and pagodas and stupas, which are forms of religious architecture in Asia, inspired the column structure. This piece was called “Constructed,” and its companion “Deconstructed,” was a single image of all of the shells piled up on the floor as if the column had collapsed. I had realized that the process of finding meaning was more important than the meaning itself.
Another series of conch shell photographs involved using the shell to make impressions and designs in sand. The sand was again a reference to Tibetan art, specifically sand paintings created by monks as a meditative artistic practice. The shells were all in various stages of erosion, and sand was used to represent the final outcome of the decomposition of the shell. One of the most successful images from this series was a diptych called "Form and Emptiness." The title comes from a line in the Heart Sutra, "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." It is a chant that I had memorized in my Zen practice, and I was particularly drawn to this line because of its expression of duality and non-duality. Another photograph, "Rough and Smooth," combines using opposite textures in the sand with the impressions of the conch shells. One shell is big and the other is small, layering the work with dualistic comparisons.

Other Buddhist concepts that I was interested in exploring in my work were impermanence and interconnectedness. I felt that the sand and the decaying conchs were related to these concepts, but I wanted to push the concept with my technique. I had already worked with double exposures, so I decided to experiment with slow exposures and motion to actually blur the subject to achieve a more ephemeral quality in the work. I had seen Harold Edgerton's work, and was inspired by his simple compositions, black background, and incredible ability to use photography to capture the moment and show what the human eye could not see. I was not interested in using strobes or timers or other fancy equipment, so I just relied on basic studio lighting and my own instinct for timing.
I was still using conch shells, and my efforts led me to the discovery that I could use a slow exposure and motion to create circular images. I would use a turntable, spun by hand over a two to four second exposure. By leaving the table still for part of the time, the object would be still and focused, but it blurred when the table was rotated. Close observation allowed me to judge when to stop or start the table so that the circle was complete and the object was visible at the same time. I was interested in the circle as a universal symbol for the cycles of life and also as a specific symbol used in Zen art. There was a tradition in Japanese sumi-e ink paintings of monks creating an enso, which is the Japanese word for circle. Their action was a meditative and artistic practice, and the resulting work of art was also an object to look at for meditation. It was both a means and an end to attain enlightenment. By using a variety of objects, such as feathers for the "Feather Enso," flowers for the "Azalea Enso," wool for the "Goat Wool Enso," and a turtle shell for the "Turtle Shell Enso," I have shown a range of living creatures that are united by the geometric symbol of the circle and the blurred exposure, showing the passage of time. I do not think I attained enlightenment, but I did create a series of ensos using a variety of natural objects that is my expression of the impermanence and interconnectedness of all life.

**Becoming Bamboo**

In January of 2006, while I was still making the enso photographs, I began photographing bamboo and found that it was a subject that contained a multitude of metaphors to engage my aesthetic and spiritual sensibilities. After spending so much time in the studio creating black and white photographs of natural objects
that were remnants of living creatures, I realized that I needed a change. I
needed to be outside experiencing the living beauty of nature. I had seen this
grove of bamboo that I passed by on my way home every day, so I decided to
start there. During my research into Japanese art and enso paintings I had seen
some paintings of bamboo, so it was a natural evolution in my work. It was in the
winter when I first noticed bamboo, and it was its vibrant greens among the
browns and grays of winter that inspired me to switch to color photography for
this work. I was using a medium format 6 x 6 camera for the greater detail of the
negative, and I initially planned to crop the images into circles, so I was shooting
with a circular mask in the viewfinder to actually see in circles. I later abandoned
this idea, realizing that it was unnecessary to go that far to achieve unity within
my work. The symbolism of the circle was expressed in the form of the bamboo
itself, which is hollow inside. However, I continued to work with the square
because it is so simple and geometric. There was a sense of stability in that
format which encouraged me to be more active within the edges and seek more
variety in creating the compositions. The square eliminated any need to consider
how the vertical or horizontal frame affected the image.

Aside from the color, other aspects of the formal elegance of this plant,
especially its slender segmented stalk and delicate wispy leaves, added to my
interest in capturing its beauty. I was also fascinated with its dynamic growth
process. It seemed to take over the landscape, crowding into the space of other
plants and engulfing any structure or material that was in its path. It had
completely taken over a vacant lot near my home and was beginning to grow
through the metal and wooden fences that surrounded this tract of land. It seemed that it was very difficult to contain this hardy plant, which is why it is called an invasive species, and its associations with something Asian growing in the Southeastern United States reminded me of ecological succession and economic globalization. Our world is becoming increasingly connected, and what happens to the environment and economy of one area will eventually affect the entire planet.

Ecological succession is a scientific term used to describe the orderly evolution of an ecosystem, a community of plants and animals living in the same environment who are dependent upon each other for sustenance. Some examples of this process are what happens to a pond as it fills up with sediments to become dry land or when a lava flow cools. Grass begins to grow, then shrubs and trees move in until the land reaches a point of stasis. A similar process happens when nature is destroyed by something like a forest fire or a climate change. Usually this is a cyclical process, with nature achieving a state of equilibrium only to be disrupted again by some catastrophic event. Bamboo is a metaphor for the ecological impact of both humans and nature on each other. It represents the destructive speed at which human beings have taken over the world and begun to use our natural resources at a rate faster than they can be replenished, but it also represents nature’s resilience and ability to renew when left to its own devices.

Bamboo is a metaphor for the destructive and regenerative properties that are part of all natural cycles, and the environmental movement is concerned with
human beings finding a way to live in harmony with these natural cycles. Green
is the color of the environmental movement, and bamboo, like the pine tree, is an
evergreen, but it is not a tree at all. Bamboo is actually a grass. In Asia, bamboo
is a symbol of flexibility, longevity and resilience, and “The Three Friends of
Winter” in Asian art are bamboo, pine, and plum. There is a long tradition of
using bamboo in art, music, construction, and decoration, and it is widely revered
in Asia for its inherent utilitarian and aesthetic qualities. Later, after more
extensive research into bamboo, I discovered that the plant’s physical
characteristics, especially its rapid growth, make it an excellent alternative to
using trees as a renewable resource. Pine is especially impacted by our
demands for wood and paper products, and is currently farmed as a renewable
resource, but bamboo’s speed of growth and the variety of other uses for its
leaves, shoots, and roots make it an excellent alternative that may even be better
than pine. Some of the photographs in this selection show bamboo in relation to
trees and wood, while other images only show the unique physical characteristics
of this amazing plant.

Influences

As part of my research into bamboo, I looked at the work of other artists
who photographed similar subject matter. One contemporary photographer who
shares my interest in trees is Robert Adams. He even discusses his spiritual
connection to trees and the land in an interview from his book, Cottonwoods.
Adams photographed cottonwoods growing near his home in Colorado and was
interested in showing the impact of humans on nature through this body of work
and other images of clear-cut forests in the West or trees in urban developments. Although his photographs were black and white and emphasized the banality of the ordinary landscape, his concern for nature and interest in trees has been an influence on my work.

Edward Burtynsky, John Pfahl, and Richard Misrach are other contemporary photographers who have also influenced my work. They all work in color, and their images deal with the impact of our growth and technology on the environment. Burtynsky created a series of photographs in China that relates to my work in terms of both economy and ecology. His work depicts Asian industrialization and its impact on the environment as China works to compete with Western nations in a global economy. There is even an amazing photograph of bamboo being used as scaffolding at a construction site in this body of work. John Pfahl photographed landscapes that were physically altered by the artist to emphasize visual perception. He also photographed other landscapes that were not manipulated by the artist but did show the environmental impact of human development, and his latest book, *Extreme Horticulture*, deals with the way humans control the growth of plants for entertainment and decoration. Pfahl does not include any photographs of bamboo in this book, but I can think of ways it could easily fit into this series. Richard Misrach’s work confronts issues of the impact of technology on the environment in his series of nuclear waste sites in the deserts of the Southwest. His photographs of animals that have died from radiation poisoning are heartbreaking, but the beautiful color and light of his images entice the viewer to take in a scene that otherwise would be considered
repulsive. The formal beauty of the work of all of these artists compels the viewer to consider what would normally be a very depressing subject matter. To raise awareness, people have to be able to see the problem, and these artists have all used their art to raise awareness about the impact that humans have on the environment. My work is a bit more hopeful and offers a potential alternative to our current practice, as opposed to only depicting the problem.

Another artist whose work has hugely influenced mine is Minor White. His approach was very spiritual and involved using metaphors to create visual poetry. Minor White studied Zen Buddhism and even created a sequence of images called “The Sound of One Hand Clapping.” This title is borrowed from a Zen koan, which is a question that is used to encourage the student to think beyond logic and access one’s intuition to experience an understanding of reality. Minor White’s use of titles from Buddhism, and his interest in setting up a sequence of images that constructs a narrative that allows the viewer to construct meaning based on the entire group of images working together, both had a strong influence on the selection and arrangement of images for the thesis exhibition.

**Thesis Exhibition**

The selection of work for the thesis exhibition was chosen to represent the depth and variety of the entire body of work. Each photograph plays its role in connecting the themes of art and spirituality to environmental and economic issues related to the natural cycles of growth. The titles of the images in this exhibition encourage the viewers to make associations with the Eastern influence
on this body of work. Some references are more obvious while others are very obscure, but overall the work invites the viewers to construct their own narrative about the interactions between humans and nature. The series is presented in an arrangement of individual images separated by groups of photographs in a grid format. One image starts the series, moving to a grid of four, then one, then a grid of four, and then the final image. This arrangement serves to emphasize particular images, to create relationships among images, and to establish a viewing pace that could be compared to beats in music or the experience of the breath in meditation.

The first and last images frame the sequence with the color blue and the subject of trees. The first image shows a gigantic tree with bamboo growing below, while the last shows a sapling marked with surveyor's tape and a grove of bamboo off in the distance. The first image is titled, "The Bodhi Tree," which is a reference to the type of tree the Buddha sat under when he attained enlightenment. The bamboo is sitting under the tree in this image, and seems to lean forward in a posture that worships the beauty and wisdom of nature. Small clouds float by as thoughts do in meditation, indicating that the clarity of enlightenment has not yet completely manifested. The last image shows the bamboo off in the distance, blurred and barely perceptible but growing under a clear blue sky. This photograph is called "Mu," which is a word that means negative or no. It is often used in Zen Buddhism as a response to a koan that indicates there is something wrong with the question. The form of the branches of the sapling also resemble an Asian character, which reflects my interest in the
presence of an underlying structure or language in nature that is only partially understood, and other compositions in this series have a geometric and symmetrical quality that relates to this concept. Even though bamboo is present in the image, "Mu," it is not the main focus, indicating a more expansive awareness. It reminds me of the famous quote by Dogen, a Buddhist priest who founded the Soto Zen School of Buddhism in Japan in the 13th century: "To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things. To be enlightened by all things is to remove the barriers between one's self and others." Bamboo is also a metaphor for the self.

The two grids in the arrangement of the exhibition show two different aspects of bamboo. The left grid shows bamboo interacting with something that is made by humans, while the right grid only shows bamboo. There is one picture in each grid that does not seem to fit, but these images serve as bridges that unite both sides of the sequence. The one that does not fit on the left side is the one titled "Nature's Beauty." There is apparently nothing that is constructed by humans in this image, but the photograph was actually constructed by the artist. Although the leaf did initially exist in the image, it fell from its place before I could take the picture. I put it back in its place because I liked the contrast of life and death and the comparison of East and West in the two types of leaves. The title is a clue to the image because it refers to a Zen story about a monk who scattered some dead leaves in a garden that had just been cleaned. He did this to make it more beautiful, because beauty in nature is not the product of the
efforts of human perfection. The other image that does not seem to belong on its side is "The Path of Practice." This photograph shows a path that recedes into the darkness of the bamboo with light flowing in among the stalks on either side. There is even a sliver of light in the center that somehow manages to penetrate the thickness of the bamboo and lure the viewer to enter the image. The path looks like it is natural but was actually created by a human. This ambiguity between what humans make and what is formed by nature is a metaphor for the potential of humans to practice living in harmony with nature. The human presence is barely perceptible, and the impact on nature is minimal.

Another motif in the series is the idea of wood and how it is harvested and used for construction. The photograph titled, "The Gateless Gate," shows two huge stalks of bamboo emerging from a pile of used lumber that is full of sharp nails protruding upward. The two stalks of bamboo look like a portal that could be passed through if you could get beyond the dangerous approach to the entrance. *The Gateless Gate* is the title of a famous collection of Zen koans, which includes the koans "Mu" and "The Sound of One Hand Clapping." Another work that references trees and cutting is "Gutei's Finger." This photograph refers to a story about a Zen priest who would hold up one finger in response to any question about the teachings of the Buddha. A young boy who was one of Gutei’s students started to copy his teacher, and when Gutei found out he cut off the boy’s finger. The boy ran away crying, and when Gutei called after him, the boy stopped and looked back. Gutei held up one finger, and the boy was enlightened. The story is about absence and presence, and how attachment can prevent one
from attaining enlightenment. Bamboo is empty, and emptiness is a concept in Buddhism that involves observing and accepting reality while simultaneously being open to change. The sliver of bamboo that remained after the stalk was cut is a metaphor in the photograph for something being absent and present at the same time.

Other works on either side of the center have titles such as "Karma," "Samsara," "Interconnectedness," and "Duality," which are all references to Buddhist concepts, but the central image is key to the Buddhist practice of using the breath in meditation to attain a pure non-judgmental awareness of the present moment. This photograph is titled "The Present Moment," which is also a response to the question on the church sign within the image that asks, "What time is it by God's clock?" The entire sign is full of passages from the Bible that refer to the coming of the Rapture and the Last Judgment of Jesus Christ. One of Al Gore's messages in his film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, is that we must take action now as individuals and as nations, even if it seems that it is impossible to reverse the effects humans have had on the environment. We cannot predict the future, but we do have control over what we do right now. Unfortunately there are some people who have a religious agenda that does not serve the population as a whole. There are some Christian Fundamentalists with significant political power who do not think it is important to protect the environment or conserve our resources because the world is coming to an end soon anyway, and Jesus will save them. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright wrote about religion and politics in her book, *The Mighty and the Almighty*. She recently appeared on
the Colbert Report and made the following statement in reference to the recent hostage situation in Iran. She said, “Armageddon is not exactly a foreign policy.” Although this show is on Comedy Central, the situation is not funny at all, and I think that Albright’s statement can be applied to environmental policy and to the extremist views of any faith or country that are used as an excuse to act irresponsibly and do not promote peaceful resolutions to world problems.

Conclusion

Although this work did not set out to make a political statement, it has ended in such a way because that has been my journey as an artist. Showing my art is a form of peaceful protest to the misuse of our natural resources, but I am not just pointing out a problem. I am also offering a partial solution, which is to begin farming bamboo as a renewable resource. I think much more research can be done towards finding ways in which bamboo and other plants can be used as renewable resources, but every small contribution that individuals make towards finding a balanced approach to living in nature adds up over time. It is my intention that these photographs will help to raise awareness about the interconnectedness of all life, and the influence that politics, economics, spirituality, ecology, and art all have on the future of this planet. Trees are the lungs of this planet, so I appeal to humanity to protect our global environment and begin the process of healing by cultivating the breath of bamboo.
References


Environmental Bamboo Foundation. http://bamboocentral.org


Suler, John, ed. *Zen Stories to Tell Your Neighbors*. 1997
http://www.rider.edu/~suler/zenstory/zenstory.html


Early Work

Construction, 2004
Silver Gelatin Prints
10" x 10"

Deconstruction, 2004
Silver Gelatin Print
18" x 23"
Early Work

Rough and Smooth, 2004
Silver Gelatin Prints
10" x 13"

Form and Emptiness, 2004
Silver Gelatin Prints
13" x 10"
Early Work

Conch Shell Enso, 2004
Silver Gelatin Print
14" x 14"

Feather Enso, 2005
Silver Gelatin Print
14" x 14"

Goat Wool Enso, 2005
Silver Gelatin Print
14" x 14"

Antler Enso, 2005
Silver Gelatin Print
14" x 14"

Wisdom Tooth Enso, 2005
Silver Gelatin Print
14" x 14"

Leaf Enso, 2005
Silver Gelatin Print
14" x 14"

Turtle Shell Enso, 2005
Silver Gelatin Print
14" x 14"

Azalea Enso, 2005
Silver Gelatin Print
14" x 14"

Bird Nest Enso, 2005
Silver Gelatin Print
14" x 14"
MFA Exhibition

The Bodhi Tree, 2006
Chromogenic Print
14" x 14"

The Gateless Gate, 2006
Chromogenic Print
14" x 14"

Interconnectedness, 2006
Chromogenic Print
14" x 14"

Gutei's Finger, 2005
Chromogenic Print
14" x 14"

Nature's Beauty, 2005
Chromogenic Print
14" x 14"
MFA Exhibition

*The Present Moment, 2006*
Chromogenic Print
14” x 14”

*Duality, 2005*
Chromogenic Print
14” x 14”

*Karma, 2006*
Chromogenic Print
14” x 14”

*The Path of Practice, 2006*
Chromogenic Print
14” x 14”

*Samsara, 2006*
Chromogenic Print
14” x 14”
MFA Exhibition

Mu, 2006
Chromogenic Print
14" x 14"

TITLES

1- The Bodhi Tree, 2006
2- The Gateless Gate, 2006
3- Gutei's Finger, 2005
4- Interconnectedness, 2006
5- Nature's Beauty, 2005
6- The Present Moment, 2006
7- Duality, 2005
8- The Path of Practice, 2006
9- Karma, 2006
10- Samsara, 2006
11- Mu, 2006