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Painting, Mindfulness and Crowther's Aesthetics

Colleen Fitzpatrick

Abstract

This paper addresses the notion of painting as a mindfulness-based intervention. This premise is justified as it relates to Crowther's phenomenological aesthetics. Crowther's theory of painting makes use of a number of features that characterize mindfulness practice and reflect the mindful attitude. These include attention, self-consciousness, universality, otherness, empathy and temporality. Painting and mindfulness practice are seen as interventions upon experience that expand being through greater engagement. Heightened perceptual awareness and embodiment are central to this discussion as they are at the root of aesthetic experience and mindfulness practice. The development of self-consciousness is a key consideration in this context. By way of specific examples, I will show how this theory works in practice. Although mindfulness-based interventions and painting do not correlate directly, awareness of the many parallels and distinctions serve to illuminate the intrinsic significance of painting and the particular aspect of mindfulness that relate to aesthetics.

Key Words

aesthetics, aesthetic empathy, Crowther, embodiment, mindfulness, painting, self-consciousness, temporality, universality

1. Introduction

It is customary to approach the question of why painting engages our aesthetic interest in relation to expressive properties. I want to take discussion of this problem into a new area using the concept of mindfulness, a notion especially associated with Eastern thought, and cognitive psychology. Traditional and contemporary mindfulness interventions have much in common with aesthetic practices such as painting. This is particularly the case if we think of Crowther's distinctive phenomenological approach to visual art. He does not directly refer to a mindful attitude but aspects of his theory point to the possibility that painting could be viewed as a mindfulness-based intervention.

In the following paper I will develop the parallels between mindfulness and painting. Hopefully this will lead to a more informed theory of painting that encompasses the development of self-consciousness. It will allow, also, some interesting connections to be made between Western and Eastern thought.

The main body of my discussion begins with a brief description of mindfulness. For this purpose I draw initially on psychological theories along with Buddhist philosophy. I then address relevant points in Crowther's aesthetics and justify why Crowther is singled out amongst the phenomenologists in this area. This is followed up with a detailed illustration of his criteria of the artistic and reference to specific examples of painting. In conclusion, I argue that while mindfulness and painting are not identical, an awareness of the mindful aspect of painting brings us to a greater understanding of its significance.

2. The concept of mindfulness

Mindfulness has its roots in contemplative Buddhist practices and philosophy.^[1] Through mindfulness meditation practice, the Buddhist practitioner learns to control attention to a greater extent and better perceive events as they occur.^[2] In traditional Buddhism, mindfulness is related to the reduction of suffering, because suffering comes from the fundamental problem of the mistaken interpretation of reality:

The world is given to us through our senses but rather than stick to what we experience from moment to moment, we remain prisoner of our constructions.^[3]

Mindfulness has been described as a kind of non-elaborative, nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, and sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is. This has been shown to lead to greater curiosity and better self-reflection.^[4] It is a state of presence of mind, a clear awareness of one's inner and outer worlds.^[5] This mental state is characterized by full attention to internal and external experiences as they occur in the present moment. This definition may be extended to include alertness to distinction, context, and multiple perspectives along with openness to novelty and orientation to the present.^[6] This involves focus on an object such that, when the mind wanders, attention is brought back to the object.

Bare attention, which constitutes of mindfulness practice, is observing without evaluating, including single-minded insight at successive moments of perception.^[7] Mindfulness may be described as paying attention to present perceptions and experience in a nonjudgmental and nonreactive

manner.^[8] This entails controlling the attention in a purposeful way in the context of open-minded acceptance.^[9] The mindfulness practitioner can then become free to fully engage at a deeper level with aspects of life that are usually not experienced. The individual learns to let go of mental preoccupations and embrace pure living experience.

In mindfulness-based interventions, the mind is trained to be anchored in the present moment.^[10] This involves attending to the current experience as it is happening and a heightened awareness of the relationship with the object of the experience. A consciousness is brought to bear on the experience in that a conscious effort is made to engage with present experience that results in total immersion in the present. In contrast, we often experience the world in a mindless way, going through life but not truly experiencing it.

The word 'effort' is fitting, as the disposition that is adopted in mindfulness is one that requires some work. We force ourselves to live the experience, not just pass through it. Buddhism would say that this is living in reality. It should be noted that the practiced individual eventually lives life in a mindful way without effort, because being anchored in the present moment starts to come as naturally as not paying attention does to the unpracticed individual. The mindful individual approaches all aspects of life with awareness, including the most menial tasks. This brings meaning to all experiences.

Although mindfulness practice is executed through an initial withdrawing, wherein the practitioner focuses in a solitary way, for example, on the breath in meditation, the goal is to rejoin the universal and feel connected to others and the environment. The stage of meditating in silence is only a technique to focus the mind. The aim is to train the mind so that in other situations in everyday life the subject will take in more and engage more. This is an important point, as mindfulness interventions are often confused with being disassociated from others. The element of universality and expanding our empathies to others is key in Buddhist thought, which recognizes that all things are interconnected and empathizing with others sets us free.

Mindfulness is not a purely intellectual exercise; it takes place at the level of embodiment. Despite use of the word 'mind,' which is generally associated with cognition in Western cultures, mindfulness does not originate in the thought processes. The individual experiences mindfulness as a whole sensuous human being and learns to think not just about current experience but to live it. The training of the mind of which we speak refers to integrating our cognitive abilities with our affective experiences.

In Buddhism, mind is considered an entity that has the nature of mere experience, clarity, and knowing and it is nonmaterial. In this regard, the mind is pure and full of potential but its fundamental nature is clear light, which means its greatest potential is for the positive.^[11] It includes sense perception and mental consciousness but is heavily dependent on the physiological basis of the body. There is a strong mind-body link. Mental attitudes are influenced by physical wellness and vice versa. Importantly, Buddhism recognizes the mind's ability to observe itself. In Buddhism, then, mind is not just where we think but a blank slate ready to absorb the reality that we create for it, and mindfulness optimizes this inner world of mental events that influences everything else.

One of the ways in which mindfulness training works is to reduce habitual patterns of responding. Individuals who have cultivated this approach to experience exhibit increased flexibility, fluency, and originality in responses.^[12]

The result of this is a mind that perceives more clearly and an individual who sees himself or herself as an integral part of the world as opposed to experiencing alienation. In systematic reviews of neuropsychological findings, researchers have found that mindfulness training improves cognitive abilities, including attention and memory.^[13]

Mindfulness, above all, is about perceptual awareness, and this is why it relates to phenomenological aesthetics. Highly mindful individuals have been characterized as more attuned to sensations and perceptions. These individuals demonstrate superior perceptual abilities in visual work, memory, and temporal tasks.^[14]

3. Crowther, mindfulness, and painting

Crowther's theory of painting utilizes a number of concepts that relate to the mindful attitude that will be discussed below.

First, it is worth noting that Crowther's work has been the co-subject of two recent monographs, and he is, by far, the most prolific writer on phenomenology and the visual arts.^[15] His work involves extensive critical discussions of figures such as Heidegger, Dufrenne, and Merleau-Ponty. He shows how these philosophers theorize visual artwork through the special needs of their own philosophies rather than through consideration of what is unique to such art.^[16]

Through this lack of consideration, art is mainly understood from a narrow

interpretation of the spectator's viewpoint. Crowther's constructive work, in contrast, focuses on the process of making and the conventions by which drawing and painting are practiced. Heidegger, Dufrenne and Merleau-Ponty see the visual arts as disclosing such things as the truth of Being or of the emergence of the visible, but Crowther shows that much more is involved. Painting, for example:

...is governed by complex conventions over and above the ontology of the visible. This means that *when the world is represented in a painting, on the basis of pictorial or abstract convention, its significance, qua visible, is changed*. Through being adapted to conventions of pictoriality visible things are presented under conditions that, indeed, embody, but *also go beyond*, the making visible of vision. We have a *transformation*, rather than a translation of vision into visible terms.^[17]

The value of Crowther's work lies in the way he focuses on this transformative power. Philosophers such as Berleant have also highlighted this aspect and noted that entering the world of art requires active engagement of the total person and not just the subjective cast of the mind.^[18] However, Crowther has a particular focus on the structure of pictorial space and the intervening role of the planar structure of visual representation. Crowther emphasizes that transformation includes increased perspectives, literally seeing with, experiencing another viewpoint.

Crowther's theory of art is based on the premise of human embodiment.^[19] The human subject is just one among other such sensible beings and things with which and whom art has a reciprocal relationship. He stresses that our most fundamental relation to this world is not one of an inner thinking subject gazing out upon an external world. Rather we inhere in the sensible. It is through the function of reciprocity that we locate ourselves.^[20]

This account of being-in-the-world is derived from Merleau-Ponty, who asserted that "my body is a thing among things; it is one of them. It is caught in the fabric of the world."^[21]

According to such phenomenological accounts, embodiment and perception, which are shared by all human beings, are at the root of all paintings. Similarly, in mindfulness practice, embodiment is a means towards greater self-consciousness. For example, the breath is used as a point of focus, and in yoga the body is used in various ways; the end result is greater perceptual ability. This leads to greater consciousness of self and others.

Crowther and Merleau-Ponty emphasize that the phenomenal field is composed of the immediately perceptible, together with factors that are invisible in the sense of not being presently attended to or not being available to perception under normal circumstances. Merleau-Ponty discusses how paintings make the invisible visible.^[22] Crowther develops this notion by showing how painting does not simply disclose invisible relations but does so through adapting them to the two-dimensional planar structure of the pictorial medium. At the heart of this is how the act of painting involves an intervention upon the visible/invisible relation. In Crowther's words:

Pictorial representation intervenes upon normal perception by creating immobile figures and groups whose selected shapes, lines, and shading resemble similar figures in the subject-matter....Through its absolutely stationary 'presentness,' the picture actively separates the subject-matter from the normal conditions under which things of that kind are perceived.^[23]

Hence, while the colors and shapes of a painting are optically alive in disclosing their subject matter's visibility, the fixed planar presentation means that, at the same time, they are made available to a more contemplative attitude. Photography, too, translates the visible in planar terms but, with a photograph, we always know that it is a single appearance that has been mechanically captured, an arresting of the visible. The shapes and colors of a painting, in contrast, do not simply reproduce what is given visually. They are recognized as a stylistic bringing-forth of a possible appearance of the visible.

Crowther's approach emphasizes that painting does far more than merely disclose how things become visible. It intervenes upon the visible by adapting it to the structures of the pictorial medium. This means that painting's presentness has an unexpected temporal significance and also spatial outcomes.^[24]

This does not involve some reduction of the visible to Platonic form. Rather, it is a dynamic planar expression of optical vitality in how things become visible. Through eternalized contemplation of aesthetic space we can attend more fully to the particular nuances of how visible things inhabit visibility.

It is clear that Crowther's theory provides some major elaborations of the scope of mindfulness by disclosing interventions that involve contemplative idioms of creation and perception. The painter extracts what seems to be invisible by going out into the world and not just looking but participating. Through the making of pictures, he or she becomes aware of and embodies different levels of being, from observation of the flow of visible things to their articulation in more eternalizing idioms. The artist comes to achieve and understand self-development, and the spectator is able to share in this insofar as the work is rendered in a publicly accessible medium.

Crowther argues that, by virtue of its ontological discontinuity with the causal flow of the physical world, painting focuses and concentrates our reflective awareness. In effect, his theory of painting clarifies a type of visual mindfulness, an aesthetic space where spatial phenomena are experienced in a more focused and intense way than usual. Indeed, he shows that this is something intrinsic to the very making of paintings.

Below, I will consider examples that illuminate important ways in which mindful attention to painting transforms the character of the subject-object relation in experience.

4. Historical examples

Consider first Chardin's *White Tablecloth*. This is a perfect example of a mundane object that we overlook in normal quotidian life. How often do we take the time to observe the sensuousness of a tablecloth? Art affords us this opportunity. As only the artistic eye can, Chardin looked deeper than the commonplace scene of the table with food on it, and shared what he found with the viewer.



Figure 1 – Jean Baptiste-Simeon Chardin, *The White Tablecloth*

The artist manages to evoke a whole range of sentiments and a way of being by bringing awareness to this scene. There is a soft sensuality, a slowness, a gently abandoned mood that is nuanced with tenderness. The startling beauty of the white pigments in a setting of earth tones manages not to be startling but inviting in an almost seductive way. It is softened by the flow of the fabric that barely touches the ground with grace and elegance. The planar nature of pictorial space, coupled with the sumptuousness of the paint, translates an uneventful scene into a provocative one. This initiates a response in the viewer, who then has the opportunity to open up to what may have been commonplace in reality but is transformed into a rich, sensuous experience exercising the powers of perception. This happens via aesthetic space that has, indeed, transformed the visual world.

Where the work is mindfully considered, the experience goes beyond spectating. A merging of subject and object evolves, and a dialogical relation emerges. The subject receives and incorporates the world of the object; the world of the subject transforms through phenomenological participation in the life of the object. Because a painting is imbued with embodied gesture, it reaches out to the subject.

Both viewer and artist engage in a way of seeing an aspect of the world that was previously unnoticed, with all the concomitant feeling. In terms of mindfulness, the result of this is the experience of a broader range of human capacities through engagement with the aesthetic object. Through active observation, we arrive at increased participation. We could also say that both viewer and creator have benefited from a new perspective. The acts of broadening horizons, increasing perspectives, and exploring the bounds of being human in this way speak for themselves.

Next, let us reflect on Casper David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea*. It is true that the sea is a subject that does enthrall many people, unlike a tablecloth. Nevertheless, we do not often take the time to truly examine what the sea evokes in us. The sheer expanse of it, *qua* sea, is an obstacle to actually contemplating it in an accessible way. The picturing of it sets it apart for contemplation. Friedrich captures not just the sea as one may gaze upon it absentmindedly; he has created a mindful space of tranquility, isolation, and reflection. Merleau-Ponty said of Cézanne that he "made visible how the world touches us." [25] This statement also aptly describes *The Monk by the Sea*.



Figure 2 - Caspar David Friedrich, *The Monk by the Sea*

The inclusion of the lone figure in the vastness evokes feelings of our own mortality, fears of loneliness or, perhaps, the joy of solitude. These states could not be elicited in the same way by viewing a person walking along the shore because the artist has composed the image using the picture plane, the paint, and his own gestural way of being-in-the-world. The original scene has been digested by the artist, who captures a moment with the intention to express.

We do not need to know if the artist intended this painting to be melancholy or tranquil; it could be either depending on the viewer. The point is that it is evocative. This goes beyond responding to, viewing, or even appreciating a painting in the ordinary sense of the word. This is an interactive relationship.

We see something that we have never seen before and never will again, that is, this particular artist's view of this scene. This is his perspective on a corner of the universe, a corner that exists for all people but Friedrich noticed it. This painting is capable of inducing a viewer to more closely engage with the actual sea and, indeed, other people and the self. This relates to why Crowther says of pictures: "They project places for exploration through virtual movement and perceptual relocation. It might be said, indeed, that *pictorial space is itself an emblem of consciousness*."^[26]

Frederic Leighton's *Drapery Studies* gives us nothing less than a way of being-in-the world, which is alluring and seductive, considered and effortless, at the same time. Here again, we have a commonplace item, nothing more than a piece of material. If not for art, who would have thought that a piece of apparently discarded material could say so much? It is unclear what it is draped over, and it is obviously not a human body, yet it is suggestive of embodiment, of peaceful human slumber. The organic way that it flows almost feels as if it was just removed from a human being or fell off and was carelessly left.



Figure 3 - Frederic Leighton – *Drapery Study*

Of course it is likely that the artist positioned it this way to draw it. But the artist must have been inspired by a piece of discarded drapery himself at some point that stirred his emotion in order to draw this composition. The viewer's imagination becomes exercised because Leighton decided to externalize his into the public arena.

It is irrelevant whether the artist staged this scene or not. The result is an image that speaks directly to our sensual side and activates the imagination. As a result of engaging with this picture, the viewer may pause at an actual piece of material and see the beauty and wonder in it. Does this really enrich one's life? I believe the answer is yes. To see the uniqueness in every moment and observe beauty in the most mundane of things certainly adds to psychological completeness and contributes to the evolution of self-consciousness. To experience wonder where it could not previously be found can indeed be described as transformation. This is the goal of mindfulness. As we become more conscious of the details around us, we become more conscious of ourselves. The two are inextricably linked because, as Crowther has pointed out, we are conscious in relation to others and our surroundings.

Hofmann's *Pompeii* provides an example of abstract art that is an energetic and emotional explosion created by the push-pull effect of the lines and colors.[27] Abstract works possess a presumption of virtuality and an "aboutness" that involve idioms of optical illusion. This is not a trick of the eye but "...can be seen-as possible visual structures that are overlooked, neglected or taken for granted under normal perceptual circumstances." [28]



Figure 4 - Hans Hofmann – *Pompeii*

Crowther uses the term 'transperceptual space' to describe these usually hidden aspects of space that abstract paintings bring our attention to. In *Pompeii*, there is a clear sense of depth but its very ambiguity calls one all the more to focus, to look, to find. Its emotiveness corresponds to aspects of the external world and also our own affective inner world. Because abstract works do not represent something concrete we can immediately recognize, they provide special opportunities to attend in a mindful way and to "see-as." [29] Hofmann abstracted from his world in order to create this compelling and dynamic pictorial space, and the viewer abstracts from the finished piece that opens up a world of imagination and lived experience. This stirs awe and wonder just as a representational painting can.

In relation to non-Western art, it is worth noting, not surprisingly, that Zen art, for example, has always seen itself as integrally related to mindful transformation:

In general, art has always been transformative. It enlarges the universe, touches the heart and illuminates the spirit. The Zen arts, because of their emphasis on spiritual insight derived from personal experience, are a powerful tool of exploration. They point to a whole new way of seeing ourselves and the universe, and way of living that is simple, spontaneous and vital. [30]

A painting as simple as *Circle, Triangle, Square*, by Sengai Gibon, induces endless fascination. The three geometric shapes touch and intertwine as the ink tone increases in intensity from left to right. Their overlapping relationships provide an example of transperceptual space pointing to interconnectedness that we may have failed to notice in a more narrative work.



Figure 5 - Sengai Gibon – *Circle, Triangle, Square*

We can see, from the above discussion, that, in the words of Berleant:

Active discernment is a demand of all painting, from color field and minimalist art to traditional landscape painting and portrait painting, where the distance and direction of the viewer as well as an activating eye sets the forces of the painting in motion. [31]

5. The Relationship between Mindfulness Theory & Crowther's Aesthetics

As we have seen, the goal of mindfulness-based interventions is to bring us face to face with a new outlook, uproot us from our comfort zone and allow us to see reality in its fullness. In this way we more fully engage and

have greater clarity. Buddhist philosophy asserts that a veil of obscurity is lifted through mindful meditation and truth is revealed. Buddhism recommends that we start living in the real world of momentary experience.^[32]

On these terms, the role of mindfulness is to improve the individual's abilities to observe what is occurring while it is occurring. This results in a mind that is more perceptually observant.^[33] Crowther's works addresses the aesthetic experiences that arise from this. By investigating these, the scope of mindfulness in aesthetics can be further illuminated. A number of points of commonality will be reviewed below.

Let us first consider the disinterested character of aesthetic appreciation in Crowtherian terms.^[34] It concerns the logical grounds of enjoyment and distances us from the intended practical outcome. Disinterestedness, in this context, means that in order to identify with the artistic interpretation, the artist does not need to be physically present nor do we need any empirical facts concerning the work or the artist. We need only the pure, occurrent experience of being in the presence of the artwork. In this way, we experience an aesthetic empathy that is based on freedom rather than one beset by the psychological pressures that characterize our direct relations with other people: "Pictorial beauty completes us, by placing artist and audience in a free and mutually benefitting relationship at the level of space".^[35]

This disinterested stance echoes the nonjudgmental attitude that is recommended in mindfulness practice. In this case, the practitioner does not get stuck in intellectual analysis but experiences the moment in a detached way, neither judging nor holding onto practical considerations. This stance liberates the practitioner; otherwise the mind is a prisoner of its unbridled discursivity.^[36] This nonjudgmental state that is cultivated also allows an empathy with others because it increases our abilities of acceptance, as opposed to judgment.^[37]

This brings us to universality, which is a key point of commonality. Both mindfulness theory and Crowther address a reciprocal aspect that reflects the universal nature of existence in an interdependent world. Crowther asserts that all things are interwoven into an inseparable unity.^[38] The observer is not solitary but part of a public. Aesthetic space, as he describes it, provides a safe place for the world of possibilities that is fueled by the imagination; aesthetic space is a universal and a shared space that has implications for the *other*.

Right mindfulness, as it is termed, has implications for the reciprocal relationship that we share with our fellow human beings, including ethics, awareness of others, and being of service in the world. Reciprocity is also an indispensable consideration in Crowther's philosophy, evidenced in his notion of ontological reciprocity. He coined this term to describe the condition whereby the human subject is in a constant state of reciprocity with the world in which it inheres.^[39]

This is closely linked to aesthetic empathy. The central role of the artist's style involves seeing-with, an aesthetic empathy embodying a psychological identification with the artist's way of seeing the visual world. The pictorial nature of the painting allows the viewer to be witness to the artist's view without the pressure associated with face-to-face interactions.^[40] This aesthetic empathy echoes the universal connections that are realized through mindfulness practice.

Crowther explains how seeing a picture discloses things and how this happens through an aesthetic empathy that he describes thus:

A mode of identification with the artist's way of seeing and representing visual possibilities of space-occupancy.... the selection of content and the style in which it is rendered allow us to share the artist's vision to some degree at the level of space itself. He or she offers a way of seeing – of interpreting and evaluating the visible world. ^[41]

In this respect, we are not only imaginatively absorbed by the artist's style but we also learn things about our own possibilities and limitations. Aesthetic empathy through pictures, therefore, facilitates psychological completion in personal and also social terms.^[42] Artwork reflects our mode of embodied inherence in the world. In the creation and reception of art, we are able to enjoy a free belonging to the world.^[43] However, we do not do this in a vacuum but alongside other embodied beings. Paintings allow us to imaginatively identify with the artist's struggle at the level of empathy, or to appropriate the work as another way in which it is possible for us to view being.^[44] "Species-identity" is to be conscious of oneself but also conscious of being part of a shared species, to see oneself as part of a broader phenomenal field.^[45]

Through mindful attention to experience, the practitioner increases perspectives. This is achieved by not just going through the motions in life but by being alert, including being alert to fellow human beings, as they are a large part of our experiential field. It has been noted that mindfulness interventions increase flexibility. This has implications for tolerance and a

more open mind. The more that we engage, the more we reflect through increased connections with the world. Clearly, this means abandoning a parochial attitude and view of the world and others. This is a type of empathy that occurs at a similar level to Crowther's aesthetic empathy. Note that the contemplation of paintings takes place in the privacy of one's own consciousness but, as with mindfulness, there are sequential effects in the external world.

Temporality is another shared aspect of mindfulness and aesthetics. According to Crowther, making pictures is temporal but it also involves some release from the confines of time as a flow. He asserts that the wonder of picturing consists in its opening of a space that is both discontinuous with and different from the normal perceptual order while still being orientated by some demands made by that order and by the external observer's own personal experience.^[46] In this regard, "It is a metaphysical *intervention* on our experience of space and time."^[47] This account of painting, articulated by Crowther, eloquently describes the process of mindfulness meditation, whereby the practitioner must focus on the present moment in order to transcend it. Indeed, he uses the term 'transcendence' to explain why painting has "an enduring expressive significance."^[48]

This is a transcendence of the finite self towards an experience of "Godhood" but the religious interpretation can be adapted to the secular viewpoint.^[49] This is because the experience of God in pictorial art is fundamentally aesthetic.^[50] Pictorial art offers visual possibility, takes an "as-if" form, the inhabiting of which "completes the self."^[51] This is achieved through increasing perspectives, literally seeing as others see. In this context, the self evolves through identification with others.

Crowther gives much attention to what he terms "eternalization of the moment." This means that an artwork can preserve and present a moment of decisive human significance and "the moment of present awareness emerges through its reciprocal relation with a broader field of perceptual and latent spatial, temporal, and existential factors."^{[52],[53]} Crowther and Buddhist scholars, such as Dreyfus, would agree that the present moment is of fundamental significance. Crowther claims that this is because the present moment is the major principle of temporal unification, that is, the present is more than just a temporal point or instant. It both connects and separates our experienced past and anticipated future.^[54] Dreyfus asserts that the retentive ability of the mind is of vital importance because it is what allows for future recollection of the present moment. He goes on to say:

This retentive ability of mindfulness is crucially connected to working memory, the ability of the mind to retain and make sense of received information. When we see an object we are not just presented with discrete time slices of the object, we integrate it within a temporal flow so that it is given as making sense....consciousness involves the ability to put in resonance and various cognitive processes so that the information they deliver make sense and produce coherent patterns.^[55]

Phenomenology and Buddhist philosophy have a shared heritage. Crowther's philosophy is in opposition to Cartesian dualism and science, which celebrated rationality and observable experience. Consider this statement from Dreyfus that illustrates the concordance between both philosophies:

Western medical and psychological science has historically emphasized intellectual knowledge and concrete experience as the main stream of human knowledge. The concept of mindfulness derives from a culture that places higher emphasis upon subjective experience as a source of inquiry and understanding.^[56]

6. Points of distinction

Mindfulness interventions and painting do not correlate directly. Painting is about visual perception and imagination; mindfulness is about perception in general. In addition, mindfulness practice recommends focused attention, where possible, to any and all aspects of the world. In contrast, the aesthetic object is the unique focal point for contemplation. Every context provides an opportunity for mindfulness; however, the aesthetic experience is seen as something special and unique.

In the mindful experience we are orientated towards a given phenomenal object in a contemplative way, seeking to embrace the fullness of its being. We are engrossed with the special way the object engages us, how we feel in the act of contemplating and responding to it. This is an important point. The focus of this mindful activity is on the actuality of the object whereas aesthetic appreciation centers on the image and its genesis, which means the realm of possibility.

In the painting, we focus on the fecundity of all the gestures and thought that went into its making, and the way these project a possibility of experience rather than an actuality. There is an invitation to see it like this.

We cannot do so at the level of actuality, it is at the level of imagination. When we aesthetically regard a painting, we are engaging with another person's expression of the world but our seeing with them is at a virtual level.

The aesthetic experience of painting converges upon the imaginative possibilities that the object projects for us at the level of space-occupancy, whereas mindful contemplation of the object centers on the richness of its actuality. Aesthetic elements are absorbed within and converge upon our sense of the object's actuality in all the dimensions that we can be mindful of. They become parts of a contemplative whole that ranges far beyond aesthetic attention.

The aesthetic experience can use the techniques of mindfulness. But, ultimately, these acts serve to open up possibilities of experience at a virtual level. The mindful attention is subsumed within the aesthetic experience. Similarly, in mindful attention to something, we can attend to its aesthetic unity. In this case the aesthetic is subsumed within the mindful. The result of these arguments is that mindfulness and aesthetic experience often swap and exchange patterns of attention, and, in this, they are mutually reinforcing.

7. Conclusion

Aesthetic experience and mindfulness are not the same. However, aesthetic experience is, among other things, a type of mindfulness. In this way, it is an intervention, a transformative intervention. The creation and the appreciation of paintings, by their nature, carry many of the benefits of a specifically mindful intervention.

My intention is, in part, to answer the questions: What is the point of painting? Why has it enjoyed continued existence in an ever-changing world? My argument is that if we accept the benefits of mindfulness interventions in relation to self-consciousness, in conjunction with accepting Crowther's interpretation of painting, our understanding of the intrinsic significance of painting is enhanced. This is because we can see the many points in common between the two, and Crowther's aesthetics is cast in a new light. We do not simply accept his arguments; we see that there is a bigger picture into which his theory fits, a foundation, as it were, of which Crowther, himself may have been unaware.

Clearly, with regard to aesthetics, there is a finished work that is a product of gesture. In the case of mindfulness, there is no such thing. Yet perceptual attention to the present moment as it is occurring through embodiment is at the center of both mindfulness and the aesthetic theory discussed, and one could argue that the end goal is still the same, to more fully engage with life.

Aesthetic experience acts as a unifying experience. Universality is an integral element of the Eastern thought that gave rise to mindfulness practice. The practice is intended to connect individuals and raise consciousness of an ecologically shared space. Although this is an entirely different path to universality than that which Crowther espouses, the sentiment, nonetheless, is similar and the concept of empathy and identification with the other is key.

Does this elucidate anything new about painting? Yes. It shows us that the intrinsic significance of painting, in part, comes from the way in which it acts as an attentional control exercise and a unifying force. We have learned much about painting by contrasting it with mindfulness; the actual (mindful aspect) and the virtual (aesthetic aspect) elements complement each other. In fact, calling these points of distinction may be a misnomer. More accurately, we find that they highlight a complementarity between the two and the place that painting occupies existentially becomes more meaningful through this knowledge.

But what can we do with this information? Children are taught art history in school but not educated in the practice of mindful appreciation of paintings.^[57] Yet this is where the real joy and concomitant benefits of art lie. Awareness of this aspect of aesthetics would greatly benefit teachers of art history and teachers of drawing and painting because the ideas presented here are practical and applicable to the study, appreciation, and creation of art, particularly painting.

If students were introduced to the mindful aspects of painting and integrated this into their approach to art, it would have far-reaching possibilities. It must be stressed that this goes beyond art appreciation. Mindful engagement with paintings involves focused, present-centered engagement with the work that entails attending to how it portrays a perspective on life, a way of being-in-the-world through gesture and style. What I refer to here is an education in mindful perception. This is, indeed, called for in order to balance the current climate of sound bites and fast-paced images.

Proponents of mindfulness are clear on its benefits but, in relation to art, little has been said except that mindfulness practice can unlock creativity.^[58] My purpose has been to examine the nature of painting rather than demonstrate how to become more creative through

mindfulness. Painting, in this regard, is viewed as an intervention on reality, and mindfulness occupies an integral place in aesthetic experience. This feature of mindfulness has been largely ignored, among many that have been analyzed in a plethora of literature on the subject.

Examination of the intrinsic value of painting has never been timelier in an age obsessed with digital imagery and instant gratification. In the 1980s, certain radical theorists took up the theme of the death of painting and, based their judgment, on the claim that advanced painting had shown the signs of internal exhaustion or at least marked limits beyond which it could press.[59] Although there have been compelling shifts in the art world, painting enjoys a continued existence. In the modern world of technological advances, it is worth marking the value of painting and exploring the question: What is the value of painting?

Interestingly, mindfulness is a central cultural topic of our time, and yet philosophical discussion on its unique relationship with aesthetic experience is nonexistent. I contend that painting is, by nature, a mindfulness-based intervention that, when practiced through creation or appreciation, sharpens perceptual skills and brings greater awareness of the environment, others, and, ultimately, ourselves.[60] Because it is experienced more consciously, aesthetic space is a mindful space. In the contemplation of paintings and mindfulness practice, reflection is made subject to the will. Things normally taken for granted are explicitly and deliberately contemplated. The subject is not simply experiencing an act of recognition but becomes absorbed in reflection.

Mindfulness brings us into awareness of others. As Merleau-Ponty states, "culture allows us to dwell in the lives of others." [61] Dufrenne reminds us that this is our life, also.[62]

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End Notes

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[14] C. L. Anicha, *et al.* (2012) p. 265

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[17] Crowther, *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 100.

[18] Arnold Berleant, *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), p. 26.

[19] Crowther, *Art and Embodiment, From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness*, p. 1.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 1.

[21] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind" in Galen A. Johnson (ed.), *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 125.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 127.

[23] Crowther, *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision*, p. 2.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 54.

[25] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt," in G. Johnson, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* (Evanston: Northwestern University press, 1993), p. 70.

[26] Crowther, *How Pictures Complete Us The Beautiful, the Divine and the Sublime*, pp. 48-49.

[27] This work is discussed at length by Crowther. See pp. 31-34, *Phenomenologies of Visual Art*.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

[29] "Seeing-as" is a term coined by Crowther in reaction to Richard Wollheim's term "seeing-in."

[30] Stephen Addiss and John Daido Looi, *The Zen Art Book, The Art of Enlightenment* (Boston & London: Shambala Press, 2009), p. 10.

[31] Berleant, *Art and Engagement*, p. 27.

[32] George Dreyfus, "Is Mindfulness Present-Centered and Nonjudgemental? A Discussion of the Cognitive Dimensions of Mindfulness," *Contemporary Buddhism* 12(1) (2011), 41-54.

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[34] It is acknowledged that the term 'disinterested' finds its origins in Kantian aesthetics but, in the present context, it is developed beyond the strictures of its origins. A lengthy comparison with Kant's notion of disinterestedness is beyond the scope of this paper.

[35] Crowther, *The Beautiful, the Sublime and the Divine*, p. 6.

[36] Dreyfus, "Is Mindfulness Present-Centered and Nonjudgemental? A Discussion of the Cognitive Dimensions of Mindfulness," p. 5.

[37] It should be noted that this accepting attitude is reputed to extend not just to others but to the self and circumstances.

[38] Crowther, *Art and Embodiment, From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness*, p. 2.

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 152.

[40] Crowther, "How Images Create Us, Imagination and the Unity of Self-Consciousness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 118-119.

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[43] Crowther, *Art and Embodiment*, p. 7.

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 99.

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 151.

[46] Crowther, *How Pictures Complete Us, The Beautiful, the Divine and the Sublime*, p. 38.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 41.

[48] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 52.

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 52.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 52.

[52] Crowther, *Drawing and Painting as Symbolic Forms, Liberation of the Image*, p. 168.

[53] *Ibid.*, p. 174.

[54] *Ibid.*, p. 74.

[55] Dreyfus, "Is Mindfulness Present-Centered and Nonjudgemental? A Discussion of the Cognitive Dimensions of Mindfulness," p. 8.

[56] *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

[57] This is perhaps because children and older students alike are not instructed on the practice of mindfulness at all. Many experiences could be enhanced by living them mindfully, which is to say in a phenomenological way.

[58] See Ellen Langer, *On Becoming an Artist: Reinvent Yourself through Mindful Creativity* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006).

[59] See Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 4.

[60] See Graham Parkes, "Awe and Humility in the Face of Things, Somatic Practices in East-Asian Philosophies," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 4/3 Autumn (2012), 69-88.

[61] M. Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voice of Others" in G.A. Johnson, *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 112.

[62] See Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

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