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Art as a Spiritual Experience: Photos by Melida Rodas and
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PHOTO ESSAY

ART AS A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE



End of Day
JOAN STEANS, 1998.

MELIDA RODAS

Photos by Melida Rodas and Xielo Luna Cora

Her voice moved me with the quiet gentleness of a fish dancing in the rice paddies. Joan Steans was my watercolor teacher. A member of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Peace, a Buddhist, a professor of art and its history, she taught me the use of brushes, pigments, the variations of simple white paper, and a way of life that I would explore for years after.

“ART begins long before the brush settles on a page, it begins with the preparation of the elements.”

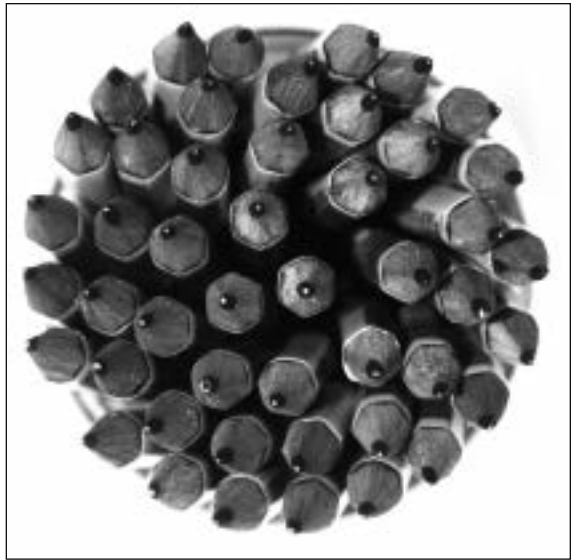
With this she began to show us how watercolor paper was prepared. She had drawn a bath for soaking it. Back and forth she rocked the paper, each hand holding one end and the other. Back and forth she submerged it. There was no rush in her process. As if putting a child to sleep, this required a tender swaying motion. Small waves lapped against the edges of the water tray.

“Centered. Like the earth on its axis, like the potter’s wheel, like the energy inside you. Like the energy inside all of us,” later she continued, while stirring an ink stick against the middle of a stone with a reservoir for liquid. She blended it with water turning the ebony pigment round and round again. The grey slate gathered its dissolved blackness. It made a whispery grainy sound as she turned it. Time did not exist for this quiet necessary work.

“In the end it should move freely, effortlessly. Only then should you begin to dip your brush.”

From our own quiet darkness, the inkwell of our own existence, civilizations appeared and developed art in order to understand our state of being

Art is a journey in search of truth,
love and peace.



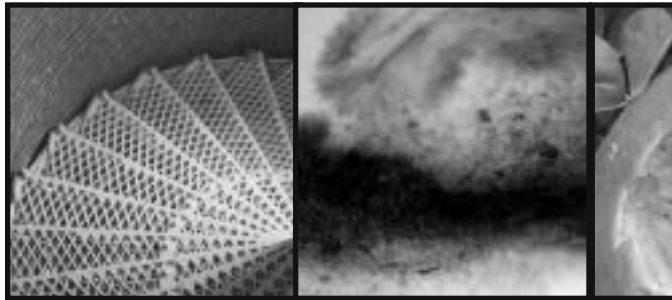
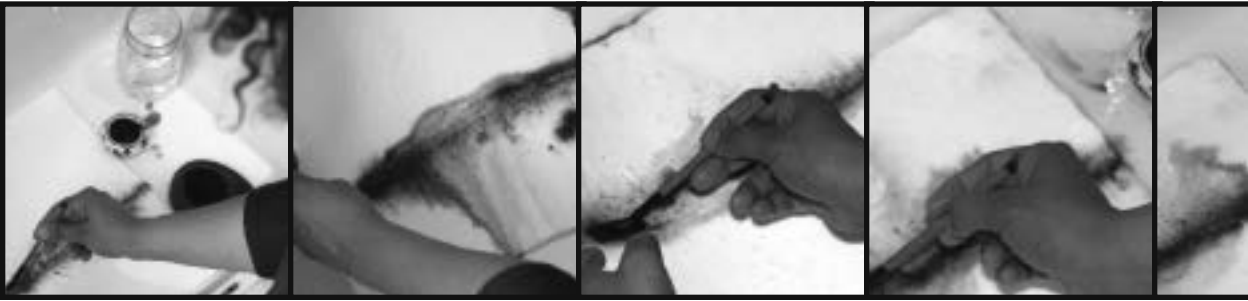


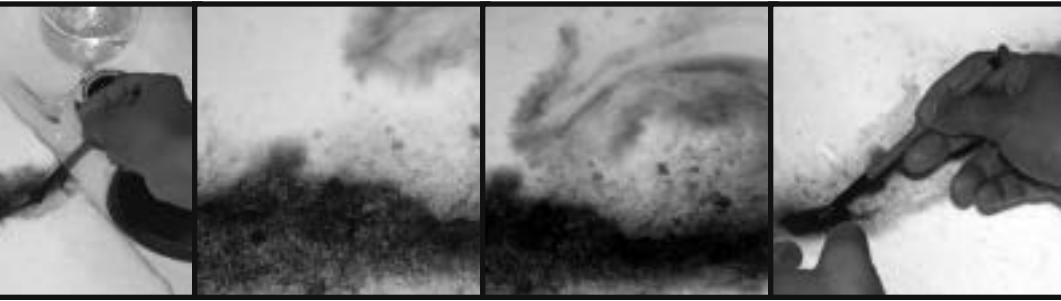


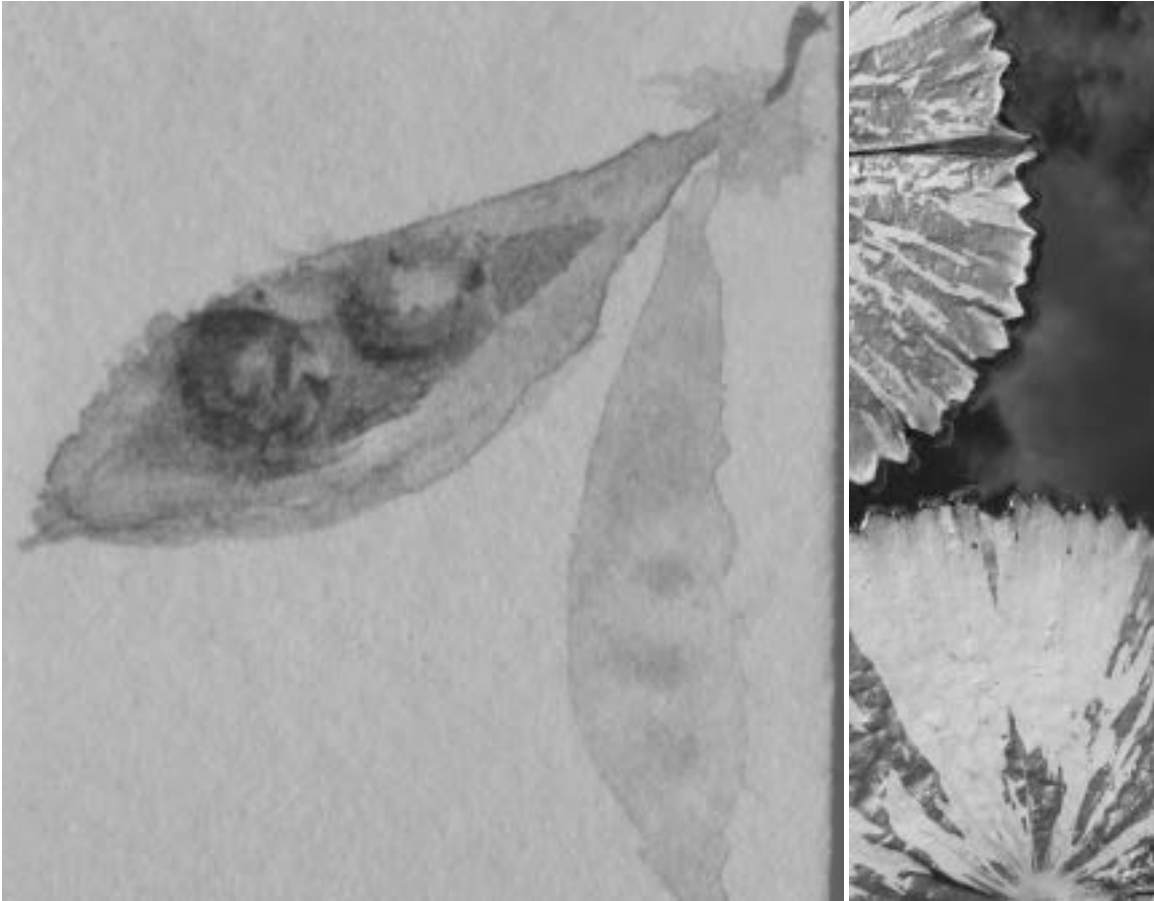
For me, Sister Joan Steans was one of “the enlightened ones.” She introduced me to the creation of art as a spiritual experience. I began to create art, not for the sake of glorification or documentation but as a path towards transcendence. It was not the image on the paper but the process that mattered mostly.

As I evolved as an artist, as teacher, “the moment” became more crucial,
the sound of the brush against the page,
the bleeding of ink against
the vellum,
the quietness of
the mind,
the cool feel of fresh paint,
the gathering of water as puddles on a single sheet of paper, as on a leaf
the weight of it,
the fine hairs of
the bamboo brush,
the earthy smell of it,
the vibrancy of color, hue settling on a page,
 my soul resting quietly in the grain, tranquil,
life’s distractions fading,
as a dark pigment washes over paper I might imagine
 the night’s sky, our infinite oneness,
In a separate composition a spot of light
is a flower, on photographic paper,
is a wonder,
 as we are,
 a streak of light
 a shadow,
 a blade of grass,
 bending with humility,
 I feel grace.

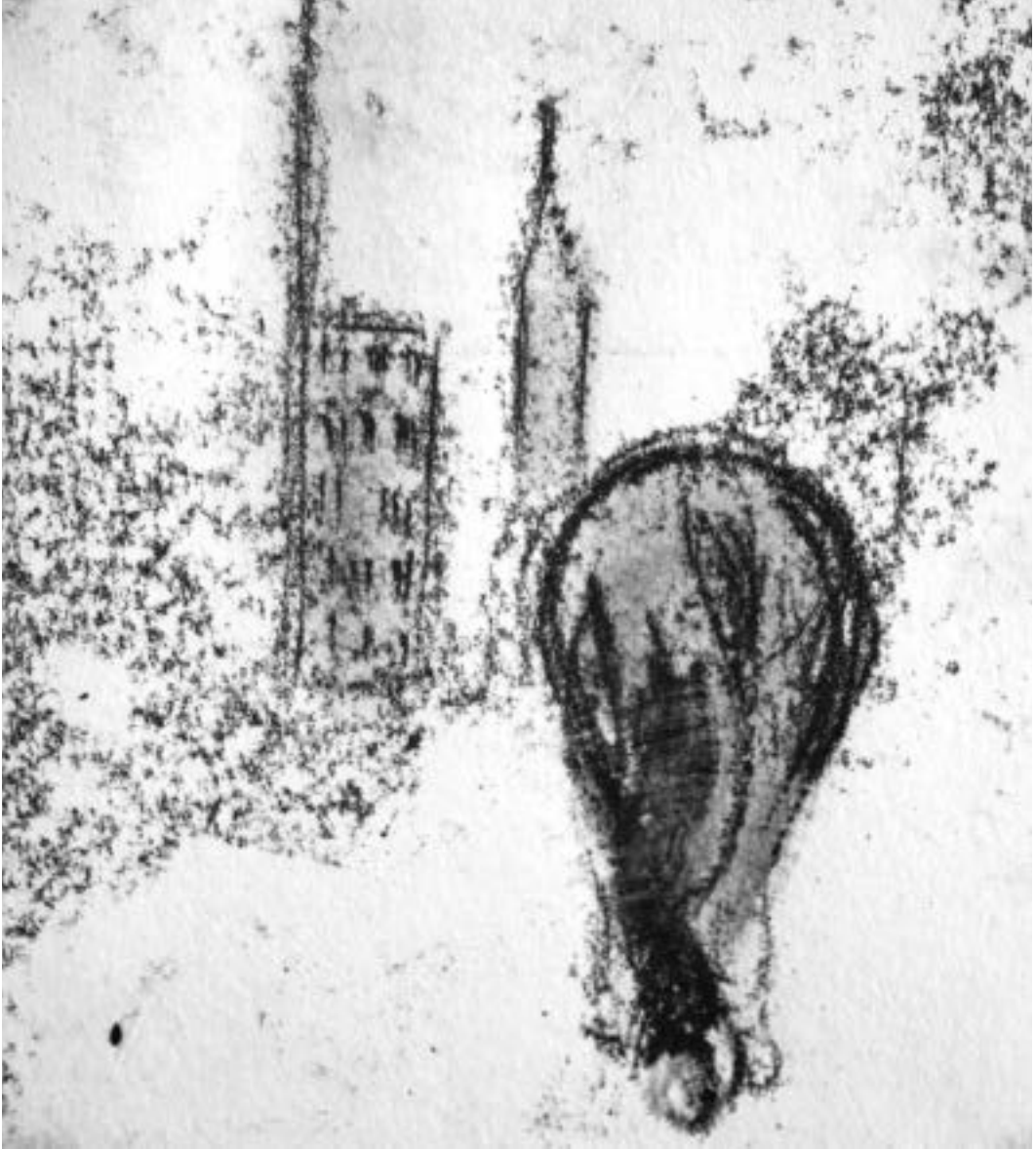












My peaceful mentor Sister Steans has remained with me in spirit through the decades. As a teacher I follow in her footsteps, and speak of process and the elements to my students.

In 2013 I lectured at Saint Peter's College, in Jersey City, NJ. The topic was "The Art and Poetry of The Saint John's Bible." Saint John's Abbey and University in Minnesota commissioned renowned calligrapher Donald Jackson to produce a hand-illuminated and handwritten Bible in 1998. A group of theologians and artists from various religious backgrounds, Jews, Muslims, Taoists, Christians, and Buddhists from around the globe, gathered to take part in this project. It took more than a decade to complete. I became interested in this magnificent work of art for its aesthetic value, its use of traditional materials combined with a modern vision to translate old stories and poems for a new millennium. Mostly, however, it was the unity of people of all faiths bringing it to fruition that moved me. Jackson explained his method: "the continuous process of remaining open and accepting of what may reveal itself through hand and heart on a crafted page is the closest I have ever come to God."

Art is an arrival.

Be it by the amber glow of a darkroom,
or embedded in the molecules of silica incorporated in clay,
the fibers of canvas,
the milk of a pen,
deep in the light,
and within the digital matrix consisting of pixels and JPEGs,

I continue my journey in search for truth,

love,

peace.

