

# The Beautiful Flight toward the Light: Reflections on an Artist's Life

*Robin M. Chandler*

I would like to share a few subjective reflections about the nature of creativity from my own point of view, training and experiences as a social scientist and as an artist. When I was no more than seven years of age, my late father would pull out his compasses and drafting tools. Quietly seated next to him, legs dangling from the sofa far from the floor in those days, I now ponder the many intellectual rituals of mentoring which took place between he and I throughout my life.

My father was my first mentor. It was his interest in passing on to an eager 6-year-old the geometric procedures of three-point perspective which set me on a course in art production. In retrospect, his broader aim was to convey a type of analytical view of the world as a set of structures, but always foregrounding his apprentice with the consciousness that humanism, globalism, and reconciling apparent opposites was the key to unlocking the meaning of life. I drew horses. I painted horses. He gave me crits. 'Fabulous! Good! More! More!' he would say. I cut out paper dolls and threw them away after I was sure my scissors-hand could precision-cut, since the dolls didn't interest me, only the cutting. My parents could track me by the trail of paper cuttings and I earned an extra cleaning-up chore. I put it together in my head too late. No 'due process' in childhood.

A Depression kid, post-World War II fifties parent, my dad was, naturally, a gadget junkie. Turn a corner in the house and the Bell and Howell movie camera was glaring up your nose with Ahmad Jamal's Poinciana cooing from his new hi-fi. For ten years after coming home from dance class, Tchaikovsky and Schumann echoing in my eardrums, I climbed the front hallway stairs, sweaty and bunion-footed from too many pirouettes en pointe. I was rarely in the mood for being filmed since I was often en route to Irish step dancing rehearsals for St Patrick's Day or some school performance. There are reels of 8mm film somewhere of family, friend, and stranger alike doing mundane or zany things, and I hope these remain lost forever. Like my baby-boomer

peers, I was an American Howdy-Doody TV kid who watched the Russians launch the Sputnik, making us all irreversible technologists.

Then there was literature. Blessed with endomorphic genes, Daddy had season tickets to the living room sofa where he hulked over novels which he had read so often the spines had dissolved. Newspapers, milk cartons, classical literature; he read anything with words. 'No Decameron', he said. 'You're too young.' 'No' means 'do it' to adolescents. I thought he knew the rule. Skulking under my pillow at night with a flashlight and Boccaccio, I could draw imaginative and irrational parallels between its characters and the nuns and priests at Catholic school. Boccaccio's fantasies (or facts) were fodder for balancing out the equally incomprehensible celibate life of the religious clergy. So I put the metaphors and symbols of twelve years of parochial education behind me - grotesque uniforms and saddle shoes, daily mass, Gregorian chant and Verdi's Requiem, crucifixes with magic potions, Latin orations of Cicero's and Caesar's conquests, the Virgin Mary and the 'Immaculate Deception', poison yard sticks for bad kids, ashes on the forehead, and endless, endless processions for endless holy days and fetes, along with a healthy respect for God and being taught by feminist intellectuals - and at nineteen years of age became a Bahá'í. Since my parents were always on us kids like a cheap suit, there was no chance of invoking the Hague Convention. There was no chance, imprisoned by all this creative imagination, I would become a nuclear physicist, or so I thought.

'Babe' (my father's nickname) was my first music mentor. Beginning, he might say to me, 'now let me see if I can explain something to you', and proceed with a lecture demonstration about various popular dances. Perhaps he would say 'listen to the rhythm, the melodic structure ... and count', as he twirled me around the floor to Duke Ellington, then asked me to sing a few lines of Gregorian Chant, and hum a few bars from Stravinsky or Schubert and asked if I could 'see' the music! Sometimes he would simply pull out a rare book edition, explain it as family patrimony and threaten to return from the dead if I ever lost or sold his precious books in which he forgetfully and peripatetically hid money. Was it the books or the money, I often wondered, that he was more worried about? 'You can always get more money', he would insist, 'but a good book is hard to find'. In retrospect, these were outrageous expectations to lay on a child and from time to time it crossed my mind that he might be nuts, definitely different from the other, more normal dads.

It was not until my late 30's that I realized many artists pass their lives without mentors and, often, outside stimulating environments. In that third decade of my artistic life, American painter Lois Mailou Jones became a second mentor to me, equally relentless and exacting, until she died, an octogenarian, at the end of the twentieth century. She had ridden the waves of all the major movements of that century. The Indian art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) and many others have waxed poetic about the uses of art, the

lineage created between teacher and student-apprentice, and the power of art to transform artist and audience.

However, 'no chance' is a challenge to God, as I later became a social scientist, closing the circle of my training and all the forms of cultural education I had absorbed. God always has the final word, the final melody, the final brushstroke as we try to set boundaries for our own universe of creativity and, at the same time, break all the rules in an effort to produce that ineffable artwork which also has substantive form and meaning.

In retrospect, I realise I lived in an intellectual paradise with a renaissance man who worshipped and respected the powers of the mind, loved knowledge, and stopped in his journey to see that the ecstasy of intellectual and aesthetic discovery was passed on to me. This is our charge, our mission, those of us who labour in the unfallowed fields of the knowledge industry in the information age: to discover it ourselves, whatever concept, theory or evidence, and to pass it on. How much the better to pass it on with the love of knowledge with which genius is endowed.

### The visual text and the written text

With such an upbringing, who would expect my work to be anything but an interdisciplinary or global enterprise? I was an early convert thrown to the lions of mono-disciplinary complacency where learning ends when you get letters after your name. Like many others, I refused to study 'just one thing.' I could 'see' the links, the theoretical networks, the elegant structures connecting idea and practice! What was wrong with everybody else? Social science, educational methodology, studio production and art history! Why not? It always seemed so natural. Yet one quickly discovers that the first order of business in scientific creativity and creative science, if one wishes to be taken seriously, is to develop a 'language', a means whereby communication with others is possible. The expression of thought in form. Not merely the written text, but oral tradition which relies heavily on the power of memory (an ancient high art we have dispensed with), and the visual text, the 'language' through which an artist speaks, drawing the spectator's gaze into pictorial, architectural space, or cyberspace. The 'language' of music, theatre, dance: each enraptures us through the configuration of sound, literary dramatisation, or gesture.

I have pursued this path as a permanent calling. Consequently, 'returning' to science through doctoral work in sociology, cultural theory, and epistemology after many years in the arts constituted an affirmation of my early training; the idea that designing 'bridges', 'walkways', 'reservoirs', and 'airways' was a means by which seemingly disparate knowledge bases could be bridged and linked. Borrowing from this architectural model for thinking about the interdisciplinary and artist-scholar complexities of my work, I will devote my remarks to the forms of intelligence which have become central to my projects.

What follows is a description of my creative production philosophy and

collage, poetry and installation work which interrogates the boundaries of aesthetics and social science.

Since 1978 I have been developing collage as a medium/technique as a non-traditional form of fine art expression in the visual arts. For the past ten years I have been revisiting an interest in the visual text and the written text. Subsequently, several collages were produced with accompanying poems which I have read publicly when my own work as a studio artist was being showcased. In 1993 I also began to exhibit installation work on occasion and to produce photography for exhibition: the use of the photograph as an extension of collage themes. Creative productivity falls over two categories - studio art and inter-arts. My interest in creating collages functions on several multi-dimensional tracks. The creation of two and three-dimensional work represents an intellectual and aesthetic reciprocity between my field research as a social scientist and my art, constituting the link between theory and praxis. So powerful and important are the 'ideas' that they demand material production as works of art and as published written texts. This occurs at three stages - technical method, style, and the life of art.

In collages such as *Genesis*, *Genesis* (1994) and *Capoeira* (1988), I explore the layering and the repetition of form as a technique to create the illusion of depth of field, or alternately to convey a sense of the flat dimension, using colour as a magnet. However, these works revise cultural history through their thematic content by, respectively, re-situating women at the centre of early history, and re-presenting an Afro-Brazilian martial art form brought by Angolan slaves during the slave trade as a syncretised dance form. The works are narrative, telling stories as a visual text to be read.

### Technical method: drawing with the scissors

Collage is a technique practised as early as the 14th century by the Japanese, described first by the French as *papiers collé* - cut and pasted paper - and later popularised by the Cubists.

Evolving over twenty years, my production technique involves an exploration and subsequent mastery of perspective drawing, composition, painting, design and collage. The 'drawing-with-scissors' technique describes my initial efforts to draw free-hand with the scissors a selection of abstract and minimalist forms which have become my 'signature' as a collagist: forms including plant and botanical forms, ginkgo leaves, priestesses, diffuse horizon lines and vanishing points, cultural icons, and experimenting with optical illusions, three-point perspective, fluid horizon lines, free-floating forms, design asymmetry, and geometric pattern.

Creating the illusion of depth of field using a 'layering' technology has been the goal of showing how two-dimensional space can be transformed into multi-dimensional space through the experimental use of colour, form, and multimedia - paper, paint, thread, copper tooling, artefacts, and my own

photography. Basic conservation issues, aided by high school chemistry, dictated the construction of experimental test boards on which I tested the chemical interaction of various papers and glues. Since most of my baseline materials (paper and glue) are handmade and/or imported, it was necessary, in the early stages of my career, to be able to anticipate what tactile and visual effects would result. Just as social science methodology is concerned with the reproducibility of experimental method, so is art method. For example, the production of handmade paper was facilitated by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) at Pyramid Atlantic (MD). However, I had been making paper prior to the receipt of that grant. Since 1995 my work has evolved into computer and digital areas and includes commitments for the development and interpretation of my work onto 'Immersadesk' technology, a process involving the creation of interactive, three-dimensional projections of selected collages onto three-dimensional or virtual spaces.

### **Style: collage as symbolic narrative**

The research and selection of thematic content which elevates the medium and illuminates the expressive possibilities of collage is derived from my field work. I get ideas from the social landscape and attempt to reinterpret space from the third dimension into the two-dimensional format. Exploring the space-time continuum through the juxtaposition of form in space shows how the faculty of creative imagination can extend itself from 'virtual' space into 'real' space. In this respect, the science of collage-making demands a 'visual language' of its own to convey cultural meaning.

Thus, the aesthetic and intellectual strands of multimedia and cross-disciplinary projects converge in the 'collage-as-symbolic narrative'. Poems often accompany collage works or installation pieces. Works range from colour intensive, to create a sense of motion on the flat surface, to a black and gold/silver palette (also my 'signature' style) to play with the 'world of black as a colour'. Symbolism plays a big part in the style and energy of the works and most contain 'visual codes' which will only be comprehended as a new, more global paradigm takes hold. The idea of visual codes and secrecy is integral to the awakening of artist and audience alike.

### **The life of art: the artist as artefact**

The artist is a participant in the creation of social worlds, the first concentric world being the art world. As each artist develops, s/he may subsequently create social space as a conscious advocate of a set of values or beliefs about the role of art, social life, and the artist. One of the first questions an artist asks is, 'what is the meaning of my work and for what and whom do I create (paint, compose, film, choreograph)?' My early artistic influences included Da Vinci, painter-collagist Henri Matisse, Lois Mailou Jones, collagist Romare Beardon, Gauguin (whom I studied as a child), and my father's drafting work.

However, my seminal influences as an intellectual observer began in 1966 in South America and the Caribbean. Subsequently, the world as a social unity became my production matrix.

As an artist matures, the question is extended to include '... and how might I pass on the traditions of art and the ideology of creativity and contribute to an ever-advancing civilisation?' In this way, an artist may choose to link the insular life of solitude (the studio) with the social and political events of their time. It was for this reason that I migrated to the world of social science, having experienced and observed social spaces from an artistic vantage point. Democratisation movements and the art/artist later became the logical extension of my own participation as an artist - not only my studio work, but including arts administration, policy advising, and the launching of CARAVAN and The Peace Doors Project. Knowledge about how art worlds emerge and function represents a large database from which I tap for my teaching and course development, and which validates an intrinsic relation between the workplace and the classroom. I have been especially interested in art as a tool for spiritual transformation and stimulating the notion of global citizenship.

Finally, as a recent example of the consolidation of my art activities, I have been honoured with an international tour of my collage work with the US State Department's Arts in Embassies Program (1996-1999, 2000-2003) touring embassies in Gabon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Africa. This occurred within the same period as two artist residences - Johannesburg (1994) and Cape Town (1996) - and exhibitions in Durban (1996) and Johannesburg (1997). Thus embedded in the fabric of the South African art world, I was able to gain valuable insights into this arts community and include those experiences in a book on South Africa dealing with the politics and institutionalisation of art among the creative communities of South Africa, pre- and post-apartheid.

### **Principles, procedures and the language of collage**

Scanning the particular thematic content or 'signature' of my collage-style genre, I mention the recurrence of other stylistic influences - the minimalist abstraction of African art, the geometric symmetry of Islamic ornamental design, and the laws and principles of Japanese painting regarding proportion and design and colour field harmony. Over twenty years, the process of collage-making has suggested a life metaphor; one in which we piece together the fragments of our lives and ride the universal wave of human experience.

As a physicist attempts to explain the nature of life by reconfiguring sets of equations, hopefully leading to some unified theory, my visual work seeks a coherence, an elegant means for organising complex visual data on a two-dimensional plane according to some inner question, some leap of imagination.

Following a period of mastery-of-technique, my iconography began to emerge as a signature style by 1984. The period during which an artist masters

individual technique conforms to a scientist learning advanced mathematics and theory as tools of speculation, investigation, and experimentation. Artists are concerned with the poetic treatment of that same conceptual space, only in tactile or plastic form. Using abstraction as an approach to form - human and anthropomorphic creatures, lush images of vegetation - and a colour palette from highly saturated colour to a black-gold/silver palette, I amassed a set of repeated forms which rush through the picture plane. My work seeks a symmetry and a depth of field through a 'layering' of forms across a space-time continuum creating a 'visual language'. Working with an assortment of papers - mostly handmade or imported - and testing and mixing several adhesives, the task was then to devise a logistical means for sequencing and arranging each layer of each dimension on the picture plane to create an illusion of hyperspace or depth of field. Three means resulted: one, the use of clear sheets of acetate to lay out and separate each layer; the second, using a Spectra Polaroid instamatic to take instant photos of each layer; and the third, and more recent, has resulted from the use of computer scans of existing works from color slide format to pict file format. Filtering tools allow the reconfiguration of a work in such a way that the same composition can be visualised through many different treatments. This latter technology has triggered infinite possibilities for my own work. Further, computer graphic and sound applications as well as the internet have opened up opportunities in a wide range of fields from theatre set design to creating published research for electronic journals.

The topics of my work in collage and poetry line up with on-going commitments to global projects, the use of the arts and cultural exchange to advance the peace process by getting people, particularly urban students, to think differently about puzzle-solving the great issues of our time.

Depicting cross-cultural myths and tales, family portraiture, and social themes such as the establishment of world peace (the nine-part Peace Series, 1989-90), I have attempted to invoke a mood which, I hope, inspires the viewers with an elegance of form and a more universal coverage of the varying meanings of humanism. As such, social issues often find their most discomfiting but necessary presence in my work. Two more recent installation works are *Morningsong for a Tillian King* (1993), a commentary and poem on the Rodney King incident, and *Freedom and Madness* (1994), concerning the tensions of living the truly democratic life. Exhibited at the Federal Reserve Bank in Boston (1993) and the Mills Gallery at the Boston Centre for the Arts (1995), public response to *Morningsong* was particularly compelling given the brutality of the installation piece as a manifestation of violence and brutality. This work represented a marked departure from the style and medium of my 'signature' work. However, many artists would agree that the process of art-making is an eternal struggle with experimentation. As an individual passes through different stages in their life, the expression of artistic messages and their execution must undergo transformation, lest the artist die

with their genre. Art is a means, then, for perpetuating personal expression and defying mediocrity, and it keeps us thinking about who we are as human beings. It is a life commitment for me and a 'calling': an urge which began with my father's tutelage.

The socialisation and informal training of an artist have many elements which are linked with personal satisfaction and occupational success. Mentoring is an integral, though sometimes absent, aspect of an artist's career mobility. For some of the most formative years of my creative productivity I was fortunate to have Jones as a mentor. She aggravated, assaulted, role-modelled, encouraged, advocated, titillated, chastised, questioned, and praised my career and creative output with the goal of making me a better artist. I only hope she is proud that another generation has accepted the mantle of leadership in a profession which has always been a long and thorny, but spiritually redemptive, road.

Along with the need to create a body of work that exemplifies a certain identifiable style, mastery of skills, and other aspects of an artist's informal training and growth, public recognition also determines the public reception of an artist's productivity and career longevity. This acceptance into the fold is challenging. Historically, screening and legitimation is conducted in an exclusive way across race, gender, and lifestyle. Entrance and exit from the art world operate against an artist, and resilience in the face of frequent rejection is an unfortunate practice in getting work recognised, exhibited and reviewed. I have chosen to focus my exhibition practice at multiple venues, sometimes designated at a niche market/client, in order to maintain public representation of my work. For the most part, I have never been formally represented by a gallery, except for a consignment period with the former Isobel Neal Gallery in Chicago. From my first exhibition in 1978 to the current three-year international tour of my collages, I can say that the tortoise always wins the race. I have attained the rewards, achievements, and 'status creation' which many artists never achieve. While my work has been purchased for institutional and private collections, the thrill of the studio experience remains fresh and it is my true identity as a professional. Coming out of the studio into the public sphere was sparked by community-based organising popular in the United States and abroad in the 1970s and, later, social and economic development initiatives.

### **CARAVAN and the Peace Doors Project**

When multiculturalism and the arts were first being launched at the state and federal level in the early 80s, CARAVAN, Inc. made a substantive contribution to public school education in the Boston, Cambridge and Lynn public schools under state and federal grant protocols. Later, CARAVAN was incorporated and listed with the Massachusetts Department of Education. It continues to offer consulting services in training to corporations and school systems.

By 1994, an appointment as a Fellow in the Center for Innovation in Urban Education (1994-95) at Northeastern University (where I teach) enabled me to write and ultimately publish an account of the CARAVAN model as a book chapter in *The Promise of Multiculturalism: Education and Autonomy in the Twenty-First Century*<sup>1</sup>.

Thirteen years later in 1993, I launched The Peace Doors Project (incorporated under CARAVAN) as an international initiative in arts, architecture and peace education, a project which replicates the CARAVAN model in its emphasis on the education and training of young people for peace through the arts; that is, to influence change by promoting a shift from cultures of violence to cultures of peace. The PDP is currently under review by the Department of Public Works, Government of South Africa, where it was 'workshopped', along with Australia at the InSEA (International Society for Education through Art) World Congress in 1999 in Brisbane.

## Conclusion

None of this happens to any artist unless, in the last analysis, one remains very close to one's spiritual roots. My roots are not merely Native American/Irish/German Jewish/African American blood lines, but the blood lines of my lineage as a Bahá'í. Thoreau's words have had deep resonance for me as a fellow New Englander: 'If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.' For Bahá'ís, Bahá'u'lláh is the Drummer for this age. Clinging to the hem of His robe is the only way to fly. And what a glorious ride it has been!

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1. George Katsiaficas and Teodros Kiros, (Eds.), New York: Routledge Press, 1998, pp. 101-114.