

Gilah Yelin Hirsch\*

## **An Artist's Styles of Discourse Words, Strokes, Images, Action: A Quiver of Expressive Media Probing the Unknown**

### Abstract

In this essay, I examine various styles of discourse in my four-channel practice of creative expression. While the definition of discourse is attributed primarily to writing or speaking, I am including painting, filmmaking, and teaching as dialogic exploration. While each has a particular discussion style between an artist (initiator) and recipient, I will show that they flourish in unpredictability and the unfound. The essence of original innovation is mined in uncertainty and unknowing. With this understanding, one can develop new and groundbreaking imagery in any medium.

### Keywords

Creativity, Expression, Teaching, Art & Healing, Multidisciplinary

### Introduction

In the late 1970s, I found a silver ring by the side of the road near my house (Fig. 1). Even though it had been mangled and crushed by traffic, I could discern a Hindu female deity on the damaged surface. She carried what appeared to be a brush in one upraised hand and a writing implement in the other. I guessed that the silver spherical image had been a coin portraying the Hindu deity Saraswati, goddess of knowledge, music, art, speech, wisdom, and learning, and was the third in the Trivedi trinity of Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Parvati. Although too damaged to restore, I kept the rather magical ring all these years. As I grew adept in more means of expression, I understood the evocative image of the multifaceted deity.

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Figure 1. Indian Deity Saraswati Ring  
Source: Collection of the artist

As a painter, writer, filmmaker, and educator who works with ideas, words, images, and commodities, I consider a continuum of discourse styles, each reaching a different facet of kaleidoscopic consciousness. An artist is a medium that utilizes a particular medium for each vehicle of expression to create a style that denotes a unique manner in which something is said, created, expressed, or performed. Although usually reserved for verbal or written expression, discourse refers to exchange, conversation, or detailed exposition. While metaphors and similes may be particular to all four vehicles of expression that I employ, each perhaps alluding to similar meanings and messages, diverse forms stem from various portals of knowing. My choice of medium is prompted by a need to communicate most profoundly.

Although I was a writer long before I was a painter, I have been painting and writing simultaneously since the 1970s. Painted images arise independently from the content of expository writing, and each discipline entails a unique and separate process. In the last 30 years, I have been developing original theories based on cross-cultural psychiatry, neurology, bio-theology, mental and physical healing, many of which have already been published in multidisciplinary publications, in addition to my book about the relationship between creativity and mental illness. I write about insights that I have gleaned from my personal life and observations collected during my travels, suggesting an emerging philosophy based on my global anthropological, biological, theological, and multidisciplinary investigations.

## **Writing**

Writing begins with a developed concept that I wish to transmit coherently in an exciting and redolent manner, in strong contrast to my painting which begins typically with random strokes and no intentional goal. While I see the entire gestalt of a painted image at every step of the process, I must read and write each piece again and again from start to finish before I can fully affirm the content. Although I have a goal in mind, the creative adventure lies in the divergent tangents, analogies, and metaphors that may arise along each new untrodden path to enrich the foundational idea. The discourse is between writer and reader, the former hoping to persuade the latter to intellectually comprehend and emotionally feel the intention of the writing so that they will follow the story to the last word. The reader follows along, swimming in the ideas presented up to each instant, enticed to join the writer in further exploration.

## **Painting**

I work in a series of paintings, sometimes two or more series concurrently. The series may deal with a specific subject matter or follow a mysterious dialogue between the stroke and my subconscious. In each series, I deal with a specific idea and/or technique until I feel that the emerging images are beginning to have repetitive elements, meaning that I am not pushing further from the safety of the known. I know that I do best when challenged and must invent something at each stage. By "invent," I mean to allow the image to lead me further into the mystery.

I am a painter who is seduced by and courts the emerging image. In this case, I am more like an abstract expressionist who does not know the outcome of the work until it is finished. However, my paintings are ultimately not abstract, as one of my goals for the yet-to-be-born image is to have a convincing dimension. It has been suggested that I document my process in every significant painting. Each painting is an evolutionary tale that can also be observed in photos of the paintings during their progress. Furthermore, the paintings' titles keep changing as the image is transformed, and titles are only decided in the last embodiment of the painting.



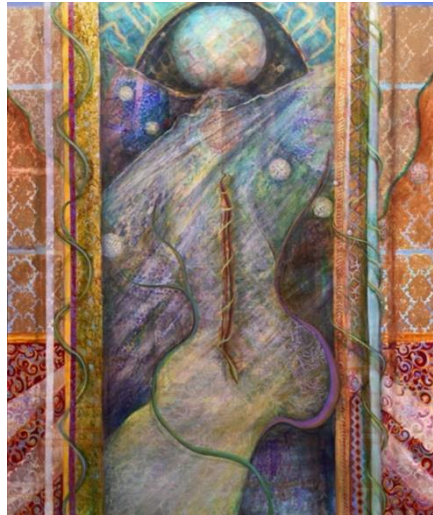
1. September 11, 2020



2. September 28, 2020



3. November 2, 2020



4. Delicately Tethered, February 28, 2021

Figure 2. Painting in Progress. "Delicately Tethered",  
Gilah Yelin Hirsch, Acrylic on Canvas, 72 inches x 60 inches.

1. September 11, 2020, 2. September 28, 2020,

3. November 2, 2020, 4. Delicately Tethered, February 28, 2021.

Source: Collection of the artist, final version of the painting, Delicately Tethered

Artist's website <https://gilah.com/>

Generally, my paintings begin with a word, a thought, a memory, a seemingly random stroke, an experience, with no final image in mind. I often encrypt letters, words, and phrases in various layers to make the next image with meaningful structure and content as I engage in a call and response process between the developing image and my attraction to the unrevealed, coy, elusive image. I often turn the canvas and drop washes (dilute pigment) over the current image to see what will be concealed and/or revealed when dry. I welcome accidents of paint drips that may contribute to new imagery or may evoke another time or space. I intuitively follow the image for months, adding seemingly arbitrary events and information. Often, during this gestation period, the painting could be said to be finished, but I purposefully chose to chase the image further. Eventually, I recognize an original image that has its own life and breath and demands only slight adjustments in light, shadow, and dimension. During these last stages, I am already beginning another piece, but I keep peeking at the former work from the corner of my eye. Occasionally I will catch a spot that needs attention. Soon it stops asking and is stable, an authentically new image, replete with its self-generated title. In this case, the discourse is between the unknown and my careening imagination.

### **Message Painting**

In the late 1980s, I created painted allegories, specifically narratives, based on dreams and visions emerging from my subconscious to create metaphorical images with distinct meanings and parables. I continue to work individually on these small-scale paintings as these images rise, even while I am engaged in current works that require an opposite approach to gestating an image. I have designated the narrative paintings to an ongoing series called *The Venice Psalter*, a nod to the marvellous medieval illuminated narrative paintings that I have always admired. *The Venice Psalter* paintings begin with an image I already have in mind, and my task is to execute the image as persuasively as possible.

For example, the painting called *Choice* (2010) (Fig. 3) depicts the protagonist standing on the threshold between this world and the next, having to decide whether to take another breath and return to the much-needed work in the world or be free of the tribulations and entanglements of life. In this case, I needed to create a scene, a context in which this difficult decision may be experienced. Although couched in the mode of medieval im-

agery, it is timeless. While I reified the situation according to my imagined vision, viewers may understand this differently. In creating the image, I am giving it life to assuage my own need for externalization. This vision is independent of another's perception, although I hope that the viewer will receive meaning that they can relate to their own lives and encourage discourse with others that may lead to open-ended discussion.



Figure 3. "Choice", Gilah Yelin Hirsch, 2010, Acrylic on Canvas, 36 inches diameter  
Source: Collection of the artist, <https://gilah.com/individual-works-2007-2011/>

*Kol Eesha* (Hebrew for Voice of a Woman, 1999) (Fig. 4.) is another allegorical painting in which I created a very feminine Torah with only the words *Kol Eesha* rebelliously inscribed in the holy scroll. This image was prompted by a Judaic injunction against a woman's voice, distracting a man from studying the Torah, from being heard by a man. The painted image rose almost 60 years after the inciting incident when at eight years old, I asked my orthodox Torah teacher why we were instructed to refer to God only as He, while the names and pronouns of God in the Hebrew text are both male and female. My shocked, incensed teacher grabbed me by my long red hair, threw me out of the class, and never allowed me to come back. This event accelerated my early and perpetual questioning and seeded my feminist stance in the world.

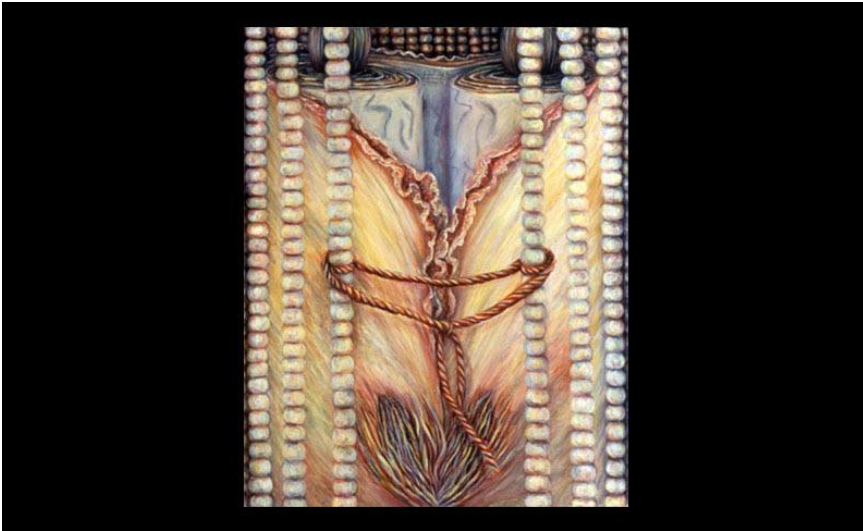


Figure 4. "Kol Eesha", Gilah Yelin Hirsch, 1999, Oil on Canvas, 32 inches x 28 inches  
 Source: Collection of the artist, <https://gilah.com/venice-psalter-series-1991-1999/>

In this instance, I created an illusionary female Torah, a two-dimensional portrayal of a three-dimensional object with no specific context, as the image itself startles the viewer by positing a prohibited vision of the female scholar. I doubt that one would call this "still life" as this rogue Torah is painted to unsettle the viewer rather than a cultural reference to historical still life. The discourse here is focused on waking the viewer into rethinking and expanding the context.

I have never considered myself an illustrator, although certain paintings I have created in the past appear to coincide with writings of the present. For example, *Birdman's Proposal* (Fig. 5), created in 1999, became a companion image for *The Raven's Gift* essay.

Here *Birdman* is shown as a hybrid human-bird, a fantasy image exemplifying the gist of the following story: I was sitting on my roof-deck some years ago, and a raven landed at my feet carrying a golden ring in its beak. The raven dropped the ring at my feet. This incredibly magical event brought to mind fairy tales in which a prince, about to marry the legendary princess, is transformed into a creature by an evil witch and is banished to seek his fortune, to slay dragons or other offenders. He is tasked to return with tokens of his adventures, often in the form of golden rings or golden apples. When he returns and gifts the golden ring to the princess, he is transformed into a prince again—and of course, all ends happily. The discourse here, the

duality and one-ness of two realities, is demonstrated by reifying the moment the miraculous hybridization occurs, a single two-dimensional animated image in transition. Is the story necessary here? I am satisfied that the image evokes questions and answers from the viewer—both to the artist and about the image.



Figure 5. "Birdman's Proposal", Gilah Yelin Hirsch, 1999,  
Oil on Canvas, 36 inches diameter

Source: Collection of the artist, <https://gilah.com/venice-psalter-series-1991-1999/>

## Art and Healing

After a near-fatal accident in 1999, I painted *The Diamond Series*, seven large diamond-shaped paintings in which I figuratively reconstructed my terribly damaged body, working in layers of healing imagery, cell by cell, organ by organ, system by system until I was whole once again. I have personally practised and taught art and healing for many years to doctors and patients. I also wrote into the images as I know that the more faculties one uses to create an image, the more powerful it will be. In this vein, the discourse is an oscillating reflective process between the intention and will of the artist or patient and the focused artistic visualization to attain wellness. By concen-



trating on reconstructing each body part according to utmost attention to the form as seen and emulated in a medical text, added to information obtained from other medical and bio-theological practices, and potentially enhanced by the imagination of the practitioner, the artist/patient re/creates the healthy version of that which was damaged.

In *Who Will Live and Who Will Die?* (Fig. 6), the first of the healing paintings, I concentrated on the spinal column, the ribs, DNA, arteries, and veins, the disposition of calcium molecules also representing compassion and regeneration of the spirit. While painting this image, the white spheres appeared and situated themselves in this pattern which I later understood to echo the pattern that I had been taught in McLeod Ganj, India, (1986) when I was instructed by the Dalai Lama in the Tibetan Bodhicitta (compassion) visualization practice. One visualizes a white sphere of compassion moving from the top of the head (crown chakra) through all the cells, systems, and organs on one side of the body and then up the other and out the crown chakra to spread compassion to all sentient beings. I later hypothesized that the visualized spheres were combined with calcium, and the practice of this bio-theology nourished both mind and body. (My theory was later confirmed by the Tibetan authority on theological practice. I discovered the identical disposition pattern of power points in acupuncture, moxibustion, and morphogens on further research into medical traditions. The resulting paintings may not necessarily be "art" pieces but can be perceived through a proprioceptive lens to be absorbed and used as "medicine" art. Tibetans visualize their bodies as the Medicine Buddha as part of the healing protocol. Navajo and Hopi create sand paintings on which the patient reclines, knowing that they will be cured by the images entering the body. In many early cultures, such as in Bali and Bhutan, the patient observes ritual dance which realigns the body to heal physically and emotionally. Opera would be another art form that does the same. While the imagery is known to change the viewer in the East, this knowledge is mainly limited to what is called pornography in the West. Everything one sees changes the psychophysiology of the viewer. Creating and/or observing a healing image will produce a positive psychophysiological change in both the artist and the viewer, while conversely, a negative image will cause a decline in the health of the mind and body. The *Diamond Paintings* have been exhibited internationally, and viewers in all cultures react the same way—sensing a new positive alignment in the mind, body, and spirit. The discourse here is tripartite between creator, image, and viewer.



Figure 6. "Who Will Live and Who Will Die", Gilah Yelin Hirsch, 1999,  
Oil on Canvas, 85 inches x 85 inches

Source: Collection of the artist, <https://gilah.com/diamond-series-1997-2000/>

*Grounded in Light* (Fig. 7), another painting that deals with reality in an original way, was created during COVID-19 in 2020 and was prompted by the necessity of mask-wearing. While, like *Birdman*, it was inspired by an authentic experience, the evolution of the event to image came about by documenting the changed necessities of life during that difficult time. The ultimate, incredibly layered painting reaches far beyond the necessity of wearing a mask for physical health and safety and alludes to the many overlays of psychological masks we are required to wear throughout our lives. Here, the image as a layered metaphor prompts the discourse between artist and viewer, beckoning the viewer deeper to decipher the mysterious masked image.



Figure 7. "Grounded in Light", Gilah Yelin Hirsch, 2020,  
Acrylic on Canvas, 52 inches x 52 inches

Source: Collection of the artist, <https://gilah.com/individual-works-2017-present/>

## Filmmaking

My films, *Cosmography: The Writing of the Universe* and *Reading the Landscape* (Fig. 8), are unusual as they are meant to create a shift in consciousness by induction of rapidly flowing sequenced content-full images that are derived from one another. These are painstakingly created films requiring from 20 to 30 years respectively to complete. Every frame is created using various digital programs by overlapping filmed, photographic and hand-drawn images and animation sequences. Thus, each frame requires weeks or months of manipulation to create a single calculated image to bring the viewer's attention into a deeper state of consciousness. The newly created layered image must then be animated and orchestrated to the deliberately selected changing music as it almost imperceptibly transitions from the previous to the subsequent frame. The next step for each cumulative frame is to add earlier dialogue recorded in "green screen" studio sessions or on-site live shoots in various countries. Finally, a text is added to each frame to provide translations for the many languages used.

Something like a trance is experienced as the viewer is led through the many images accompanying music or vocals, each singly powerful and forming an unbroken stream of mind-altering visual and audio information. These films are more closely aligned to the word flow of poetry, where the aggregate effect of many carefully chosen words penetrates the viewer's consciousness and causes a purposeful psychophysiological change. The discourse is between the filmmaker/artist as shaman or healer (changing consciousness) and the viewer as respondent or participant. Unlike usual filmmaking, in which one is led through reels of filmed action to follow a plot to its conclusion, my films are meant to be fully experienced frame by frame, physically and emotionally both in the body and mind, more of a performing art experience than a narrative. One of the significant differences in viewing my films is that the audience is always so affected that there is a universal moment of silence, integration before applause begins.



Figure 8. Still Frames from “Reading The Landscape”, Gilah Yelin Hirsch, 2019, film

Top row, left: Kenya; right: English, Hindi, Mandarin, Navaho;

Second row, left: Hebrew, right Hebrew;

Third row: Tibetan, Japanese

Source: <https://readingthelandscape.org/> & <https://gilah.com/reading-the-landscape/>

## Teaching

After over 50 years of university art teaching and training artists, I have found that the most effective teaching comes from physical demonstration and having the students act out and embody a concept. For example, in teaching the nuances between Hue, Value, and Chroma, I have the students stand in a semicircle according to their shirts' random colour, let us say the whitest white on my left as I face them and the blackest black on my right. I explain the differences in meaning—hue means colour, value means lightness to darkness, and chroma means brilliance to dullness. The students then rearrange themselves to account for the newly seen nuanced variations of hue, value, and chroma, formally not visible to them. This high-impact teaching remains indelibly remembered forever. Here, the discourse is between teaching and action, which intellectually and proprioceptively changes the psychophysiology of the student to accelerate, gain and imprint knowledge. *Become what you describe* is a powerful teaching tool.

Similarly, I ask the students to notice that the hue of the student's shirt next to them will change the hue of their shirt and vice versa. I call this "reflection and refraction" (R and R). I then suggest that this is also evident in human behaviour in which each action repercussions in another's reaction either markedly or subtly (chroma and value). The discourse between teacher and student is multisided as students begin to practice what they learn in various vehicles ranging from behaviour to art.



Figure 9. California State University Dominguez Hills Art Students, 2012

Source: Photo by the author

## Conclusion

Ultimately, it is in the *unknowing* that creativity thrives; it is where variations and modifications of discourse are discovered and pursued. The tiny increments of participation in unpredictable space and time between the actor in any medium and the recipient encourage conjuring the most unusual and practical imagery and knowledge. This kind of responsive vision may stimulate hope for a resilient, innovative, positive, and caring future.

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