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The Art of Coming Upon Something

Tanya Behrisch and David W. Jardine

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Article abstract

This paper explores the nature and experience of artistic mastery, that is, the experience of being long-practiced in an art such as writing, oil painting and teaching. Following the hermeneutic tradition and drawing on H.-G. Gadamer's Truth and Method and other hermeneutic sources, the authors engage in a dialogue about their respective experiences of what it means to become experienced in an art form. The origin of their dialogue springs from one author reading and commenting on the other's doctoral thesis, and discerning a hermeneutic sensibility in noticing the significance of emergent moments in life experience and in artistic practice.

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THE ART OF COMING UPON SOMETHING

Tanya Behrisch
Simon Fraser University
behrisch@sfu.ca

David W. Jardine
University of Calgary
djardine3@gmail.com

Tanya Behrisch draws on 35 years' oil painting practice. She is writing about why she loved her doctoral journey, while managing a team of 50 at SFU. Influenced by feminism, post-humanism and queer theory, her genre-defying work is published in journals and on The Medium. Her paintings are held in collections worldwide.

David W. Jardine is the author of the forthcoming book *"Why Study for A Future We Won't Have?" Commiserations and Encouragement for Ecologically Sorrowful Times*. He is currently receiving a thorough early childhood education from his two grandsons.

Abstract: This paper explores the nature and experience of artistic mastery, that is, the experience of being long-practiced in an art such as writing, oil painting, and teaching. Following the hermeneutic tradition and drawing on H.-G. Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1989) and other hermeneutic sources, the authors engage in a dialogue about their respective experiences of what it means to become experienced in an art form. The origin of their dialogue springs from one author reading and commenting on the other's doctoral thesis, and discerning a hermeneutic sensibility in noticing the significance of emergent moments in life experience and artistic practice.

Keywords: artistic practice, oil painting, hermeneutics, Gadamer, mastery

What follows is a dialogue between recent PhD graduate Tanya Behrisch and David W. Jardine, Tanya's external thesis examiner. We discuss what *practice*, *being experienced*, and *mastery* might mean in the artistic contexts of oil painting and writing. We are particularly interested in Gadamer's hermeneutic insights into the nature of being called by something "over and above our wanting and doing" (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxviii), what we call here "the art of coming upon something." We discuss how becoming experienced in art form stems entails being disarmed by what approaches and stands before us, such as the Elaho River in British Columbia in Figure 1 below, allowing things to unfold on their own accord in a multivocal, non-linear fashion.

This humility to stand back and let things bid us arrives after years of practicing and is part of becoming experienced in an art form. The hermeneutic sensibility recognizes the researcher as both contributor and receiver in long disciplinary traditions. This sensibility can benefit other art forms such as music and the digital arts, as well as the humanities and sciences.

Figure 1
Elaho River canyon, B.C., Canada (All photos by Tanya Behrisch)

Hermeneutics is not a procedure that can be laid out in advance and then simply aimed at an object. It is much more a commonplace thing. In the hermeneutic tradition, *becoming experienced*, and *being experienced* in an art form means gaining confidence to acquiesce*,* this is, not trying to control things beyond our control. The relationship between acquiescing and mastery is both subtle and paradoxical. *Mastery* comes from Latin *magister* and *magnus*, meaning "teacher" and "great" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Greatness, like mastery, has conflicting meanings. Someone can be "great at acquiescing" and "great at controlling others." An essence of "greatness" and "mastery" resides in both acquiescing and controlling. But acquiescing and controlling appear to cancel each other out.

Our understanding of artistic *mastery* entails being able to respond differently, and even deferentially, to emergent situations. A more common Western understanding of mastery entails reaching to control others, including outcomes, and is associated with colonialism (Plumwood, 1993; Singh, 2018). This ontology of mastery is obsessed with clarity, linearity, and A=A self-sameness and stems from fear of scarcity. Mastery as a regime of scarcity reaches to control outcomes, disallowing emergent situations to unfold in an array of abundant possibilities. Mastery as a regime of scarcity appears to preclude the art of coming upon something, an art that keeps us open to abundant possible outcomes (Behrisch, 2022; Jardine et al., 2006). While mastery as a regime of scarcity may *appear* incongruent with the abundance inherent to the art of coming upon something, Tanya contends that scarcity is *not necessarily* incongruent with abundance (Behrisch, 2022). Abundance makes room for emergent situations to arise and unfold. This includes the disciplined focus required to master an art form. Disciplined focus *narrows* the field of perception, and narrowing is a dynamic of scarcity. Thus, abundance paradoxically makes room for scarcity (Behrisch, 2022).

Mastering an art form, such as oil painting, writing, and teaching means acknowledging our messy inheritances that accompany us as we head into a complex emergent moment. The hermeneutic sensibility reminds us we are not sole originators of paintings or our classroom dynamics. It asks us to accept our indebtedness to others who have come before. Building on our recognition that we are stepping into long traditions of practice by others, we can also recognize the agency of more-than-human things that have something to say about emergent moments, which call to us "above our wanting and doing" (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxviii). These things might include the nature of a classroom space, or the slant of light coming into a writer's room, birds fluttering at a bird feeder outside the window. Tanya's oil paints' slowness to dry have something to say about how a painting process unfolds.

> When Gadamer speaks . . . of becoming someone through the study one engages in, he's not simply talking about going to art galleries and other "cultivated," elitist pleasantries. He is talking about facing the mess of one's life in our interactions with the world, *letting the world in* [emphasis added]*,* learning as much as we can, consulting the threads we inherited with good heartedness and mild suspicion, and

> letting out our familial, inherited, secret demons to see whether they can live in the light of day (Jardine, in press).

There are deep analogues here to the practice of teaching, where mastery means becoming ever more alert to what happens in a classroom, to what might be arising with a particular child, and what differences and patterns might need attention. The ensuring discussion explores the non-linear messiness, humility, and confidence that belong to mastery as a way of letting things unfold on their own accord instead of trying to control them. This is mastery as practiced readiness to let what you meet take command, a readiness to follow-up and see what happens if you do. To get good at something means being caught by it and feeling rather "out of command/control" [these two terms are part of the etymology of mastery]. It means being ready to wait, listen, try, put aside, try again . . . . I've (David) become well versed in these, and I suppose that means I have a mastery of what writing takes, but it would disappoint anyone looking for the upper hand or victory, which commonly accompanies our understanding of mastery.

A Third Thing

Well-schooled pre-service teachers will, of course, almost always ask for a rule to follow, a method to enact, raised in an atmosphere of "Tell me exactly what it is you want on this assignment [and I'll do it]" (Smith, 2020b, p. 98). It is flippant to say "There are no rules. It just takes practice and experience," as if practice and experience have self-evident meanings. They are not self-evident. The path towards mastery is a slow, humbling, and sometimes even humiliating process of disciplined practice —"the mysterious process during which what is at first difficult becomes progressively easier and more pleasurable through practice" (Leonard, 1991, p. xi).

It is incorrect to say to those—or to either of us (authors)—beginning a new piece of work, "Do whatever you want," as if that alone is enough. This sentiment (and it is, by itself, sentimental, and can become a sort of romantic, "everybody's wonderful" free-for-all) needs a vital caveat: do whatever you want, but *also* pay careful attention to what happens in front of you, to what "whatever I want" looks like, now sitting there, on the page, on the canvas, in full view, being read. This last caveat frees those starting out for the full range of adventure in store, beyond what they might want or anticipate. We note in passing two telling images from Hannah Arendt, where she speaks of new arrivals—to teaching, writing, painting, and so on. Arendt suggests leaving newcomers "to their own devices" (1969, p. 188) by experienced practitioners or masters constitutes "abandonment and betrayal" of the young and uninitiated (p. 196). Neither of these is a viable engaging option: "do what you want" or "do what I tell you to do." Both of these forget there is a third thing involved.

Artistic mastery is akin to working *with* something while letting it have *its* say. Mastery offers others the opportunity to shape and form something worthwhile and not let my off-

hand, random expression be the outcome. What gets expressed is an encounter *with* something, where whatever *I* might want is only part of what must be worked out. What I want might dominate. This might involve having to cede territory, to learn something fell short, or was simply different than what I imagined in advance of the encounter. We've both experienced this.

> The aim . . . it could be said, is not just another interpretation [another piece of writing, another painting] but human freedom, which finds its light, identity and dignity in those few brief moments when one's lived burdens can be shown to have their source in too limited a view of things (Smith, 2020c, p. 47).

Artistic and pedagogic mastery requires openness to an abundant array of possibilities. This is "not a vacuous licentiousness but a risky, deliberate engagement full of the conflict and ambiguity by which new horizons of . . . understanding are achieved" (Smith, 2020a, p. 405). As authors, we, Tanya Behrisch and David W. Jardine, were drawn to each other's work as fellow writers, creators, and hermeneutics scholars. Tanya is an experienced oil painter and parent of two children. David is a seasoned professor at a Canadian university and grandfather to his 22-month-old grandson mentioned later in this manuscript. The following writing was done both together as a third voice and separately, as an e-mail exchange in the months following Tanya's PhD defense. Our email exchanges are italicized to distinguish them from other text.

Tanya: *This passage in your examiner's report of my thesis has resonated with me. Can we start with that first sentence?*

> The candidate shows how moments this simple and immediate bristle with scholarly and artistic import, if we can practice treating them that way. Events like these seem beneath scholarly interest at first. But when the full weight of this strange pile-up on the deck boards is given its proper due—is made strange but then suddenly also, at the very same time, strangely familiar and repeated and autumnal—the full breadth of what threads and relations are coming into play right there is fully deserving of the leisures of scholarship, and the admission that my own human attention is barely able to do justice to his [David's grandson's] bare feet and mine and the cold deck and the leaves. Bluntly put, this writing has helped nurture my own writing and attention in this regard

I was gratified you saw this "bristling" quality in my thesis.

Gadamer talks about the indeterminate process of coming upon something. "The work's unique relation to the occasion can never be finally determined, but though indeterminable, this relation remains present and effective in the work itself" (1989, p. 148). *There is a bristling significance in mundane things when I am awake to what is unfolding before me.*

Driving my [Tanya's] 17-year-old daughter to school this morning, I was frustrated by tension that keeps erupting between us. I recalled advice from Flicker, my mentor, to "hold things lightly." He'd tell me her future is not mine to foretell; it's open and she's its primary author. She'll fly, stumble or fall; this is life. Driving home, signaling to turn left in a busy intersection, I wondered why the wisdom to "hold things lightly" feels so ephemeral. It dawned on me there in the left turn lane that all of life is ephemeral. This wisdom applies to everything I do, not just art or writing but also parenting, being a professional, a scholar, an artist. I must hold things lightly or risk missing moments, small hesitations between sentences, chances to begin again with her.

> Mastery entails a surrendering of assuredness and hard-won abilities.
>
> The courage of a master is measured by . . . her willingness to surrender . . . to [her] teacher and to the demands of [her] discipline. The master's journey . . . is to cultivate the mind and heart of the beginner at every stage along the way. For the master, surrender means there are no experts. There are only learners (Leonard, 1991, 81, 88).

For Rilke, creative inspiration was capricious, visiting and leaving him at will. He courted it through prayer, summoning his genius, his Angel, with a promise to begin afresh each new work as a novice.

> At the onset of every work, you must recreate that primal innocence, you must return to that ingenuous place where the Angel found you that first message of commitment; you must seek through the brambles for the bed in which you then slept; this time you won't sleep: you will pray, wail—anything; if the Angel condescends to come, it will be because you have persuaded him, not with your tears, but by your humble decision always to start afresh: To be a beginner! (Rilke, 1997, pp. 53–54)

David: *These were some of the themes that drew me to your work; there seemed to be a great affinity to experiences I've had with writing, and, in fact, with working with preservice teachers in practicum classes. "To be a beginner" and to have written so much over so many years. With the writing I've done, part of the vulnerability and openness (these words always seem clumsy, saying too much and too little) is that the simplest of events—an offhand comment, a word someone uses, a song lyric or a turn of phrase that "comes to mind"—can be like lures, leads, or little tricks in a game that seem to start up and draw my attention.*

Part of this has to do with having written a lot of things, and having thereby become accustomed to letting the trick play itself out a bit to see what happens. As with your painting, "being experienced" is an interesting factor in all this; being practiced, having practiced, having mastered the art of coming upon something, letting ourselves hear hints that others may not hear, see or experience. Here is a passage we both know well:

> "Being experienced" does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else. Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who . . . because of the many

> experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. Experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive [amassed] knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 355)

I find deep clues about writing here. Writing involves exposing myself to the weird risk that nothing may come of it—how very much writing I've done simply gets deleted as perhaps a necessary side trail or a waste of words and time that simply disappears from view. I'm finding this as I go through old journals, where the writing rehearsals pile up, one on top of the other and become, now, sometimes decades later, just dust—glad I did them, but now they are well past composting.

*However, having practiced writing so very much allows me to be vulnerable because I have confidence that I am not exactly endangered by such vulnerability. Just like my old habit with etymologies having proven to sometimes be lovely spots of possible repose in writing. I know from experience that if I go there, something might happen. It's just like this: "confidence:. . . fidere, trust, reliance,+ com-, together, with" (*Etymonline*, n.d.a) . . . confidence is not an internal state of my own self-assurance, but a trust with the ways of words . . . a trust "in" them, their netted fabrics, to hold up part of this bargain, to lead me, teach me, curve the path of thinking.*

This is not a confidence that I have in the mixing of colours on a painted surface. It's also not a confidence I began with when starting to write so many decades ago. I started off with that lovely confidence of a beginner only, floating on thin air with no wings for loft. Learning to use things I'd read, simply imitating them and over-citing, letting them be the loft of my own writing, trying to make it better. It does seem that mastering an art means becoming more of exactly what we're commonly taught to think disappears with mastery: becoming more vulnerable, like my 22-month-old grandson here, giggling aghast at birds in the trees. Of course, certain forms of mastery—providing rules and assured fixity—give us comforts and protections against our vulnerabilities, and this form of mastery is not to be dismissed.

The art of interpretation too involves a mastery, as your dissertation so well described and detailed. It is not "concerned primarily with amassing verified knowledge, such as would satisfy the methodological ideal of science—yet it, too, is concerned with knowledge and with truth. But what kind of knowledge and what kind of truth?" (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxii)

> [In becoming experienced] we experience an absolute opposition to this will-to-control, not in the sense of a rigid resistance to the presumption of our will, which is bent on utilizing things, but in the sense of the superior and intrusive power of a being reposing in itself. (Gadamer, 1977, pp. 226–227)

What starts to shape up in writing, in painting, is something that has an ever-increasing intrusive power. Or this old cite, where the artistic mastery of writing or painting involves practicing getting nearby to "beings [holding] themselves back by coming forward into the openness" (Gadamer, 1977, p. 227). What kind of knowledge are we talking about here? This is akin to a kind of ecological relatedness and to a sort of intimacy and immediacy which have their methods too, their precedents and ancestral and contemporary examples. It is why reading your work felt so strangely familiar (Behrisch, 2022).

Below is a section adapted from Tanya's doctoral thesis (Behrisch, 2022, pp. 29–34) in which she ponders the "art of coming upon something," that is, the nature of being summoned by the world and responding to it as an oil painter. This illustrates a hermeneutic sensitivity to how experience and vulnerability beckon us to respond "over and above our wanting and doing" (Gadamer, 1989, xxviii).

Letting Strangeness Speak

While oil painting, I feel myself dilate and soften to the murmuring world. I am looking for a photo of a place where I spent time outside, one I can breathe into my body and exhale through my brush. I need to *feel* its strangeness that called me to stop. It needs to be strong enough to permeate and mix me up. I need to feel bewildered by the image, confused, not in control. I need it to mix and swirl in my mouth, down my neck and chest, across my shoulders and take hold of me. It needs to *command* me, to *master* me. I choose a photograph taken while driving home from Cat Lake, British Columbia in fall 2020 of a canyon on the Elaho River, British Columbia, Canada (Figure 1). I gaze loosely at the image and recall the vertigo I felt when I stopped to gaze at the landform.

Travelling down the dirt road, I catch glimpses of a languid glassy surface moving through a dusty screen of sapling trees and fireweed. I stop the car and get out. The mirror flows thickly around a bend, a living intelligence. It breaks down into white ripples, shushing downstream over shallow rocks. A screen of feathery trees on a promontory conceals the mirror's upriver path. The mirror slides through the canyon of purple granite slabs.

The milky mirror contrasts with velvet moss in the foreground; soft fir boughs undulate over the cliff. The river's strange vastness confronts me. It is too much for me to take in, to encompass. Its majesty resists my human register, indifferent to my difficulty relating to its strangeness. I nearly missed this languid tongue moving through this canyon. No sign alerts people to this landform, this view, telling them to halt, to get out of their cars and look. The mirror does what it has done for thousands of years, indifferent to human awareness and time.

All I can do is stop and let it fill me up. It surpasses my capacity to drink it in. The canyon enters me through my eyes, nose, ears, skin, and hair. I feel a dome rise up and lift

me like a doll lying upon it. I float over the river, hovering. “Look at me,” it says. “Feel me.” I gaze down at the moving green tongue. Its slowness belies an alien coldness, a few degrees above freezing. My bones would shatter in this water. I do not belong in this moving intelligence. I have to watch it from outside. It has knowledge of time and land I can not fathom.

The green milkiness is mineral, stone ground finely into silt by glaciers upriver. The mastery that produces this colloidal milk exceeds my knowing: the slowness, the heavy relentless grinding of ice on rock. The centuries, the eons to produce this frigid mineral milk exceed me. The river’s strangeness, its radical alterity exceeds me, this sovereign masterful being. I can never encompass nor possess this mastery. So I kneel and surrender to this master through the practice of painting. I gaze at the photograph, remembering my vertigo when floating above the moving mirror. I apply a soft wash of diluted cadmium and Naples yellow, permanent rose and yellow ochre to a canvas, thinning the pigment with solvent to maintain translucence. I set the wet canvas on a bed of moss to dry in the hot sun (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Underpainting drying in the sun

Oil painting is an iterative accretive process demanding time, patience, and fumbling; there are no short cuts, no rushing. Buttery oil paints are masterful foils to mastery-as-control; each layer of newly applied paint takes days to dry. Messing with this necessary slowness ruins a painting. Rather than a limitation, the practice of oil painting offers me permission to Slow. Right. Down. Oil painting commands me to abandon treating time as a scarce resource. Painting slowly, time assumes a felt abundance. Things happen in real time. Contrary to unbounded unfettered time, painting calls for *exactly* the time a painting calls for; nothing more, nothing less. When I see that the painting is not right, then it needs more time in order to regard me on its own terms.

Each time I return to a painting to stare and breathe it in, asking what it wants, the answer is in the painting, not in me. Raising a brush to apply pigment to the canvas takes exactly the same amount of time as completing a painting. This exactitude is not measured. It is felt. I *feel* the painting come to meet me half way. This is what signals to me that it is time to stop painting. If I deviate from this practice, the painting's mystery and selfhood flatten and die. While my canvas bakes in the heat, I paint the same landform on a piece of paper, omitting trees and foreground details, features that feel unnecessary to the greater whole (Figure 3).

Figure 3
Leaving adornment and details aside, the river's strangeness remains intact

A blue tongue of land juts into the green milky river. What matters here is the gesture of land in relation to the river, the finger in relation to other land. No adornment needed. The small primitive painting works. I check on the canvas lying in the sun. It is still wet. I start another small low stakes painting of the canyon, using a cheap canvas board and a vertical photograph. I document the process and step back at various stages to listen to what it wants. The painting speaks most clearly in its early stages, as it comes into being. As it nears completion, it loses its strangeness and falls silent. When I have finished the painting, family and friends say, “wow, it looks so real! I like it!” But its realness bores me. It is no longer emerging. It feels dead, inert. There is no surprise ending; the ending was foreclosed before I even began it.

How can I prevent an emergent painting from plunging to an untimely death? “By stopping sooner!” my inner voice harangues me.

Figure 4
Photo of Elaho River canyon

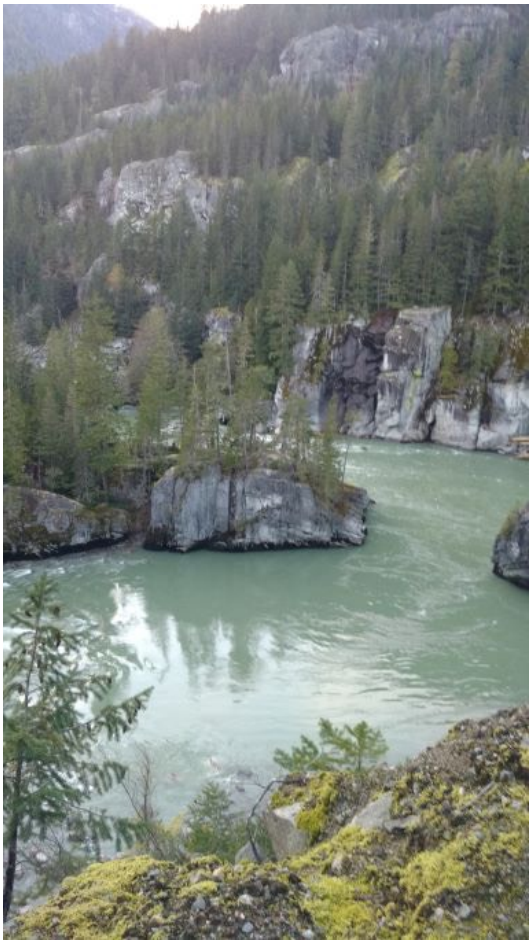


Figure 5
Early sketch on canvas board

Figure 6
Filling in the river, colouring the land

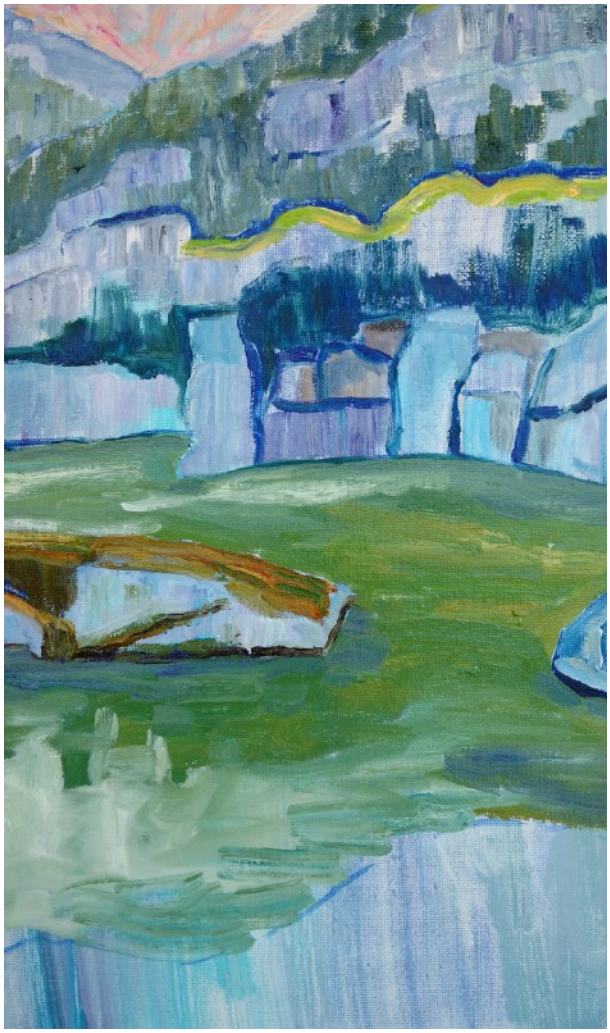
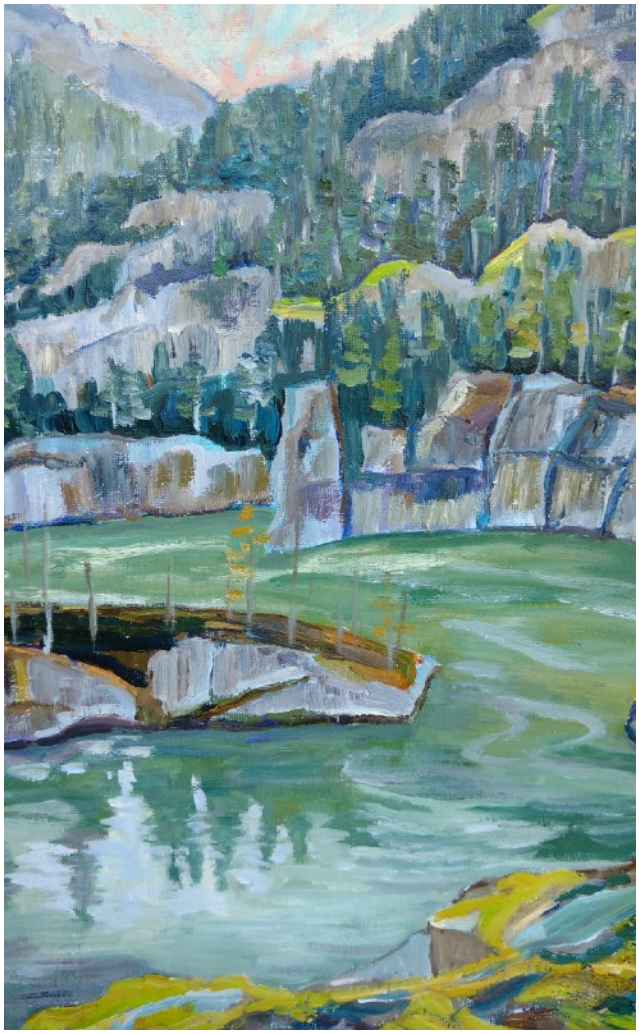


Figure 7
Adding trees and reflections



"You keep *over*painting, overworking, fussing, aiming for completion; before you know it, you've killed it! I've told you this for 30 years. But you just. Keep. Doing it! You need to stop sooner." My inner voice is right (Behrisch, 2022). Gadamer says "It is not at all a question of a mere subjective variety of conceptions, but *of the work's own possibilities of being that emerge* [emphasis added] as the work explicates itself, as it were, in a variety of its aspects" (1989, p. 118). While being admired feels nice, it does not mean the art is good. What if people do not like my unfinished paintings? What is my purpose? Seeking admiration feels disingenuous to creating art. It feels duplicitous in the art of coming upon something.

Jardine: Swept Up in the Toss and Crunch and Giggle

It's not a coincidence, then, that those leaves and my grandson's tossing of them that I mentioned in my [external examiner] report found its way into some writing of mine, about hearing loss and re-gain (Jardine, 2023a), and about me undergoing an early childhood education in his presence (Jardine, 2023b):

> Me and my grandson step barefoot over [leaves] swept up on the deck. We are swept up in the crunch and toss and giggle. Ah, these leaves' sounds once again live up to their deep familiar smell. I can smell them more in this first fall of good ears in years. With the great aid, too, of [his] focussed abandon. Autumn. Inbreath. I can hear its scents (Jardine, 2023a, p. 2).

We've both been nearby those for whom "being experienced," having "mastery" means a form of closure, and sometimes even cynicism and dismissal. I even recall teachers at a school where I was supervising my own preservice folks, sniding and sniping over how they, too, were once enthusiastic about teaching. Perhaps masking their own regrets? Who knows?

"They'll learn." Good news is, many teachers repeatedly took in student teachers because they loved being around the revival of their own love and its giddy newness, getting to start all over. Like every September portends. It is why I insisted, without irony (but with a wink, too), that I was the one currently receiving the early childhood education from my grandson:

> . . . a clip of wee lambs gamboling. Together, we saw that a horse colt did this gamboling as well, [and his mother alongside him, because, of course, it is catching to be around]. His giggles over it let me note it and name it and see it anew with him. Our walk down our snowy road afterwards made him kick up his heels and laugh, made me laugh, too. There is something very simple about hermeneutic/interpretive work and simple about precisely who gets educated in an early childhood education. I tend to be the one, over this keyboard, who finds it utterly adorable that an etymological search of "gambol"—"gambol (n.)": "from Greek kampē "a bending" (on the notion of "a joint")(Etymonline, n.d.b)—is then directed toward the word "campus." This paper, in its own way, is an old professor's gambol (Jardine, 2023b, pp. 1–2).

You've talked specifically about coming upon things that gives this "arise." Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't. But . . . taking time to notice it playing itself out, stopping over it, following it, thinking about it, making connections with ancestral voices, writing, and becoming practiced in that work—this is not the sort of work that everybody does or wants to do, likes or prefers or pursues. Me inventing the word "sniding" above can be simply annoying. I'm hoping someone laughed when they read it. I did.

I'm thinking now of that section in Truth and Method *just after the "play" section, ominously called "transformation into structure" (Gadamer, 1989, pp. 110–120)—the "making*

something" out of what has erupted, arrived, posed a question to me, puzzled me in what I read or heard my grandson say, a "something" that holds onto the fleeting play but also shapes, forms, constructs, places, surrounds, exaggerates, encourages, starts over, moves one piece here and there.

Just like we're doing with these emails—trying to let the ideas/colours/shapes fly, to be winged, but also settling myself down and quite literally, "try to compose myself in the presence of all this," to compose something that has a structure, a stay-puttedness for readers to set back into flight all over again by reading what I and we might write together, what you might paint, and then come back and want to take another look. I recall how often, when going through Truth and Method *page by page for a graduate course in research methods that I taught 27 years in a row, many would wince at this image of transformation.*

There again is that sweet romance—"Oh, you mean playtime is over?" It became a fabulous freeing and exhilarating moment when we discussed that section on play that described coming-to-understand as full of Spiel, of play, and how disappointing the act of something like "transforming into structure" initially seems. This is the spot where some will turn away from interpretive work, realizing this is not their cup of tea, this wrestling with composition and composure, with topics and topographies and myriad voices swirling around, beckoning, requiring you/me/us "a continuity of attention and devotion" (Berry, 1986, p. 4). There is a whole other deep, playful pleasure to be had in the "work" of playing out words and paints and making something. It is deeply akin to the alluring play that draws us in in the first place.

And here is the trick. I have to find ways to draw readers into flights at play in the matters at hand. What I write mustn't block their way into the Spiel of things being written about. It is like a phrase of Maurice Merleau-Ponty that I used (Jardine, 2023d) to describe my grandson's being drawn into the plays of language: "to lend ourselves to its life." (Merleau-Ponty, 1970, p. 42). The writing becomes equivocal, provocative, because the things I tend to write about are open to interpretation, multivocal, historical, layered, gendered, multicultural, and on and on. Everybody will read writing differently. The topic that's emerging is multivariate and writing that is proper to such a topic (e.g., the child's experience in a classroom) must reflect that multivariate nature if it is to be adequate to its nature.

In all this: practice helps cultivate a sense of the abundant array of possibilities that are housed there, in the thing under consideration, and to experience them as possibilities that surround and house our lives, always already and everywhere. This is "not merely mastery of . . . expertise, whose task is set by an outside authority or by the purpose to be served by what is being produced" (Gadamer, 2007a, p. 232). Neither is it "a question of a mere subjective variety of conceptions, but of the [topic's] own possibilities of being that

emerge as the [topic] explicates itself, as it were, in the variety of its aspects" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 118).

Thus, part of what we are becoming experienced in is the knowledge that new students will arrive, and these old matters in which we've been living will be called to account in ways that are unforeseeable. We "must accept the fact that future generations will understand differently" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 340), not because of our failure to gain command over these things, but because we succeed in understanding that the things under consideration stand there beyond any attempts to stop them from being "set right anew" (Arendt, 1969, p. 192) by the interdependent conditionedness and occasionality of the convivial world (Jardine, 2012).

In teaching, moments arise when the dance and play of mastery came into view, mastery to know the difference between when to apply the rules and when to step off the known path in order to respond to a unique emerging moment.

Tanya: *There's something about mastery in knowing when rules are a hindrance. I think surrendering our hard-won competencies, our certainties, takes courage.*

David*: Yes. A classroom anecdote will help: In a large, Grade 1-4 classroom, Pat Clifford, Sharon Friesen (the two classroom teachers and frequent co-authors of mine), and I were enjoying Pat's reading of a version of Beowulf to the students, and how Beowulf came to the throne of the King of Denmark and asked whether Grendel, the monster he was to confront, had weapons. The answer was "No." And Beowulf chose right then to lay down his own weapons. One student in the class, Grade Three, shouted out, "That's nuts!" and many murmurs of agreement spread over the 70 students gathered in the spell of the story. A Grade Two student piped up: "He'll be stronger if he doesn't have his weapons." Pat, Sharon, and I knew without doubt that something really interesting just happened even though we didn't quite know what it was. The class uproar about this Grade Two student's contention was rippling. We knew we had to stop, that something was going on, something was at play in this talk of weapons and strength: something age-old, contentious, beautiful, and worth whiling over, parsing, and exploring.*

"We can entrust ourselves to what we are investigating to guide us safely in the quest" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 378) even though much of it can be trying to figure out just what we are investigating. Just think of the bristle of topics in that anecdote, the myriad courses of possible ways to proceed, including going to that Grade Two child and asking them to elaborate, going to the Grade Three kids and asking them what they thought about strength and weapons and being nuts, and so on. What we three classroom teachers think about courage and power, weapons and insanity, fairness and confrontation. What a reader of this anecdote might think. We need multivariate voices because what is arising is itself

multivariate. We three knew from experience that a whole array of "the curriculum" will now surely "get covered."

This multivariate theme is explored in the following section, adapted from Tanya's doctoral thesis (Behrisch, 2022, pp. 34–40), which builds on the section above titled "Letting Strangeness Speak."

Tanya: I Can Do Better Than a Dead Painting

I am trying to find something new, something with a surprise ending not yet foreclosed. I resolve that the *next* painting, the one drying on the crispy moss next to the porch, will be different. This time, I will stop sooner. I am not sure when I will stop but if I step away from the painting often enough, I will see it before I overpaint it. I check the canvas. It is still not dry. I opt to do another low stakes painting of the canyon on paper. Omitting foreground details such as trees, moss, and fissures in the rock wall, this one seems to work, keeping its vitality. I paint lightly, allowing the glowing orange underpainting to shine through my brushstrokes. I stop before crossing the edge over which more detail will lead to ruin. It seems less *is* more. Compare Figure 8 with Figure 9.

Figure 8
This one's finished; and dead

Figure 9
Unadorned yet still alive

Same landform, different approach. Figure 8 is on a canvas board, too expensive to throw out. I took care to paint details, to bring the piece to a sense of completion. Figure 9 is on paper, easy to throw in the fireplace, yet it has authority to stand on its own and meet me half way. It knows itself. It is still becoming something and I am not the one to bring it there, it brings itself. "An entity that exists only by always being something different is temporal in a more radical sense than everything that belongs to history. It has its being only in becoming and return" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 123). This speaks to emergence. Both the painting and I are still in emergent states of becoming. We meet in the middle, co-creating what can and might *still* happen to both of us. This feels worthy of the canyon that summoned me to stop and worship its authority.

> When we say about the artwork that to be an artwork "it" must come forth, then I think one would do better to compare it to nature, which lets the flower come forth. The work of art is precisely not a product that is finished when the artist's work in it is done. (Gadamer, 2007b, p. 214)

I paint standing, placing my feet hip-width apart and centring my body between them. My canvas is my conversation partner, so I position it on my easel at face level. I set up my new painting carefully, respecting my materials: my useful easel, my canvas stretched taught like a drum across its wooden frame, my empty palette waiting for juicy new pigments, my eager brushes, worn and stained with use, clamoring stiffly to join this animated conversation.

Ambition to be great, excellent, to dominate or be admired: these desires fall away when facing the stare from a blank canvas. I cannot masterfully inject vitality or mystery into a painting. All I can do is prepare the ground, create space in the room and myself so these qualities might come to visit. I let go of familiar expectations of success, like *"this will be a good painting," "my skill should be apparent," "this will impress people," "I know what to do,"* or *"I can make this better."* In order to paint well, I must be open to failure, to painting badly. This is artistic mastery's paradox, becoming more vulnerable in order to paint well. I check my canvas. It is dry. It is time to sketch in the landforms.

Using a palette knife, I peel back the skin that has sealed the surface of Prussian blue on my palette. In the warm dry summer air, the paints have formed skins overnight. These must be peeled back to access the greasy pigment sealed inside. I glance at the flimsy paper painting, trying to recall why it worked. My inner voice screeches, "You didn't *do* anything! You didn't even *try!* Stop *trying!*" Aiming for the insouciant carelessness used in the paper painting, I sketch the landforms (Figure 10).

Figure 10
Sketching the main contours of the canyon's landform

I peer at the massive blocks of granite in Figure 1, deciphering their colours. Rock is not a colour. Granite is a complex tapestry of many colours: dioxazine violet, Payne's grey, Prussian blue, cobalt blue, burnt Sienna, raw Sienna, raw umber, and sap green. Accents of bright green algae call for Naples yellow and viridian hue. These delicious accents will come near the end. Overdoing accents is akin to adorning a beautiful natural face with too much makeup. Resisting the urge for *now* and *more* takes self-restraint and discipline.

I want to retain the choppy, blocky feeling of the granite columns, so I opt for a stiff brush with a square head. My brush strokes should follow the directional flow of the rock. I look carefully at the photograph (Figure 1) to discern how the rock is formed, how it cleaved when parts of the canyon fell into the river, beneath the milky tongue. Taking the sable brush used to sketch the landform, I apply Prussian blue to emphasize dark fissures and edges

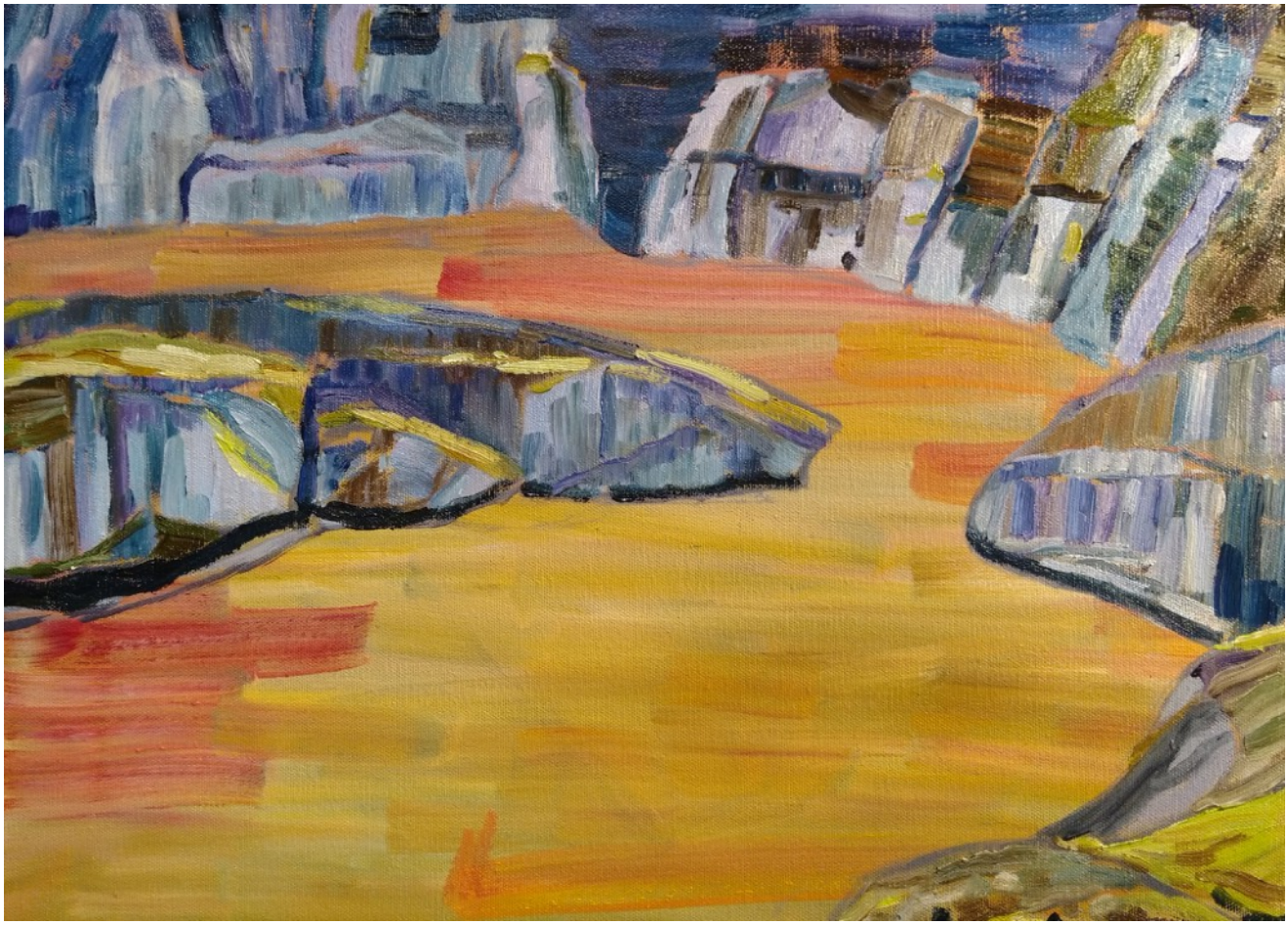
between granite chunks. A painting's darkest darks are like bass notes in an orchestral piece, invisible yet drawing and directing the eye. They are the painting's boss (Figure 11).

Figure 11

I keep the chunks distinct while painting the canyon's northern wall

I step back to observe my progress. So far, pretty good. The contrasting mineral rock columns burn against the underpainting's acidic orange. Over the next two days, I paint in the canyon rock. With the north rock wall's paint dry, I can add texture and detail. I use Naples yellow, chrome green and raw Sienna for the lichen and moss in the foreground and the finger of land sticking into the river. I turn inward to recall lying on a bed of dried moss, like that pictured in Figure 2. Moss and lichen are not *moss* colour but variegated textures and tones. So far, I feel good about the painting. It has an internal rhythm, an attitude of insouciance the river had (Figure 12).

Figure 12
Bold and indifferent, the painting seems to be working . . . so far



My painting practice defies the reduction, self-sameness, A=A, and separation that preside over empirical research. I surrender my grip on familiar research tools that served me well in previous projects, tools with which I detached, objectified and quantified the world (Behrisch, 1995; Behrisch, 2016; Behrisch & Gemino, 2020; Behrisch et al., 2002). In the Foreword to Dillard's *The Abundance*, Dyer noted "Discovery in art is often gradual, a process of minor discoveries riddled with uncertainties and the potential for making that which is discovered vanish before your eyes, like a mirage" (Dillard, 2016, pp. xvi–xvii). In hermeneutics, I'm personally involved with the river. I stay open to detours and surprise.

Courting creativity, Cottom abandons security to write her memoirs. "Thinking systematically is my comfort zone. I arrange data and ideas, spot patterns and describe them as elegantly as I am able. Memoir is a different beast. It resists the orderliness of data" (2023, para. 19–20). In this hermeneutic project, intuition and softening offer more than

following a linear path towards closure. I confront mastery's paradox by staying open to failure and an outcome not yet foreclosed .

> What we have called a structure . . . [a piece of writing, a painting] does not exist in itself, nor is it encountered in a mediation. . . [that is] accidental to it; rather, it acquires its proper being in being mediated (Gadamer, 1989, p. 117).

I do not know where this is leading, I will have to paint and see. I stand back to watch the orange glowing underpainting flow like lava through the canyon and am startled by its strangeness.

At the launch of her new book, *Contemporary Daoism, Organic Relationality, and Curriculum of Integrative Creativity* (2021), Wang remarked that the "greatest creative connection [for an artist] is between the individual and the universe" (Personal communication, 2021). I betray no community of practice when my primary connection is with the universe. For Halberstam (2011), "disciplines . . . get in the way of answers and theorems precisely because they offer maps of thought where intuition and blind fumbling might yield better results" (p. 6).

Tanya: *Masterful writing and painting share this blindness, this unknowability. There are inherent dangers to creative practices, the danger of things not working out.*

> I can only trust myself and a process that thousands of other writers have worked [out] before me. It stretches my weakest muscles—trust and sense and emotions—and sidelines my strongest ones. It is dangerous, and I recently figured out *that is precisely why I must do it* [emphasis added] (Cottom, 2023, para. 20).

David: *Student teachers ask me first, how to tell the difference between notions of mastery as command and control and mastery as staying open, and, second, whether now I should do this one or that thing. Here is the paradox of being experienced: "no learned or mastered technique can spare us the task of deliberation and decision" (Gadamer, 2007a, p. 231). There is no rule for the application of a rule, or for whether now is the time to apply a mastered technique or, instead, follow the interplay. You might realize that "something is going on, [im Spiele ist], something is happening [sich abspielt]" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 104). Spiel. Play. But now what? This is why hermeneutics is often called a "practical philosophy," because the choice between applying a fixed rule or following the Spiel, is a practical matter of thinking about which of these might be best, here, now, with this event, this case, this moment. There is no rule for making that decision without deliberating, without having conversations with others, risking some action and seeing what comes of it, and so on. It is why it has such an affinity to teaching practice.*

Tanya: *I think Hermes is with us in this back-and-forth, our circling, trying on, discarding, picking up to take another look, turning things over. There's play in how mastery*

relies on being part of a community of practice, then has the confidence to stray and break with tradition, to slip away from authorities, rules, to improvise on the spot.

The confidence you describe, giving rules the slip, allowing slippage to happen: you can't effectively give tradition the slip if you've not been immersed in it and come to understand its stabilizing coordinates. For me, this comes from years of practiced devotion, from years of experience. It seems natural that your devotion assumes an assuredness of its own ebb and flow. Writing is integral to your life, which itself is tidal. And then, when a work is "completed," "it experiences a continued determination of its meaning from the 'occasion' of its coming-to-presentation" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 146). Viewers view, readers read, students talk and ask and think and interrupt, and all this "beyond our wanting and doing" (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxviii).

David: *It's funny how often some grad students of mine thought that they got to be Hermes rather than also being subjected to his sometimes puerile whims. I can't help but note that Spiel has a nebulous, somewhat Yiddish root, meaning of a kind of "pitch line" used to try to sell you something, a sort of "fast talk" to get you out of trouble with those in charge:*

> There is one further aspect of Hermes that may be worth noting, namely his impudence. He once played a trick on the most venerated Greek deity, Apollo, inciting him to great rage. Modern students of hermeneutics should be mindful that their interpretations could lead them into trouble with the authorities. (Smith, 2020c, pp. 45–46)

Gathering of Our Thoughts

In the hermeneutic tradition, we have woven together our respective and shared understandings of how becoming experienced in an art form such as oil painting, writing, and teaching entails giving up an illusion of control. We assume a humble posture towards that which emerges, wanting to tell us something. A rich, pedagogical aspect of this art of coming upon something is that "it would not deserve the interest we take in it if it did not have something to teach us that we could not know by ourselves" (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxxv) and if it did not inevitably maintain this allure, even when the painting is "done."

We cannot know in advance, and we cannot know after the fact, if our encounters with students, rivers, paintings, and writing are thus deserving. Now we leave it to be read by readers whom we cannot master.

The implications for readers, artists, writers, scholars, and educators, are commonplace and because of this, often overlooked or made invisible by a will to control an outcome. Becoming experienced in an art form means knowing when to acquiesce to an abundance of emergent possibilities. This is part of mastering a discipline, any discipline, including other arts, and the humanities and sciences. Having humility to accept we are not

the progenitors of our projects but rather, always arriving in the middle of things. Like others who have gone before us, we have new insights and things to say. This paper invites readers, artists, and academics to adopt a hermeneutic stance towards their research. Knowing when to acquiesce to emergent possibilities lies at the hermeneutic heart of becoming experienced, the art of coming upon something.

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