

## Session 3 Knowing From the Inside

### Lesley Halliwell

#### At the coal face—a practitioner's perspective

**Amanda Ravetz (AR):** Lesley is an artist and a lecturer and is also doing a PhD at the Manchester School of Art.

**Lesley Halliwell (LH):** This is a talk that is rooted in my experience of being an artist and I'm going to talk about three pieces of work, three really different pieces of work actually, in order to cast light on what it feels like to 'be in the zone' and how that might impact on the art works made - a perspective that is most closely aligned with Marion Millner's definition of reverie, as a kind of concentration that can be referred to as 'losing oneself in an activity'.

So to begin, I'm going to go back in time, I'm going to go back to a painting that I made in 1992. I'm revisiting this particular painting because the circumstances under which it was made stick in my mind, even these 25 years later.

Just to set the scene, I had not long returned from taking an arts residency on an expedition to Southern Chile. My studio walls were full of the sketches, photographs, rubbings, fragments of writing, a range of things that I'd brought back with me and which acted as an 'aid to memory', as I worked on a series of paintings in response to the Patagonian landscape.



I worked on the floor, moving around the canvas as I poured and dripped oil paint, wood dye, molten wax, a cacophony of materials out of which the image gradually materialised. I remember that on this particular day in the studio, I also put music on whilst I painted, it's the same music that I listened to on my headphones whilst I was out sketching in Patagonia.

I often listen to this playlist whilst painting, trying to recreate an essence of the original experience back in the studio, so in itself it wasn't unusual but in the context of this talk, it was worth noting and so I painted with a sense of where I was heading, but without a clear plan as to exactly how I'd get there and I remember it so clearly, not the actual act of painting, I can't remember much about that but what I remember is the coming to, a sudden, quite abrupt realisation that I'd been somewhere else, a place where my hands had been busy but where I hadn't consciously been aware of what I was doing.

As the artist Schierenberg notes in the Radio 4 interview that I shared on the Dropbox site, "We're only aware of being in the zone of creative flow once we're out of it, once awareness of the situation returns, the magic is broken".

And yet despite my apparent absence, what remained on the canvas in front of me worked compositionally and aesthetically, thin layers of paint sat in contrast to more heavily worked in pastel areas, a pink here, a blue there; had I deliberately chosen these colours or were they lucky accidents? The remnants of previous paintings left

on my palette?

I can't remember all these years later but I suspect that I couldn't have told you even at the time. What I do know is that there was some strange coming together of materials, of experience, of process, of colour, of gesture, of form, a coming together of separate elements unified in the one moment, a moment that occurred outside of my conscious state, a place where judgement appeared to be temporarily suspended.

I was so pleased with this painting that a few weeks' later, I decided to try and make another one, only this time I never reached that other place. I was far too conscious of putting everything that I'd learned from the first painting into the second. I was fully present, I had my objective head on, I was both painter and viewer.

Now the reason I'm telling you this extra piece of the story is because as far as I'm aware, no-one else could tell the difference between the two paintings. To me, one had far more integrity, I had an emotional connection with it and I was always surprised that nobody else could see it.

You have an image of the two paintings in front of you and I'll leave it to you to decide which is which.

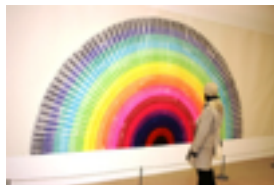


Lesley Halliwell 1995, *Cerro Castillo, Patagonia*, Oil and wax on canvas, 100 x 100cms



Lesley Halliwell 1995, *Cerro Castillo, Patagonia*, Oil and wax on canvas, 100 x 100cms

The second piece of work I want to talk about was made at least 10 years later, it's a very different piece of work and it stands in contrast to the gestural expressive painting process that I've just described. So between 2014, I made large scale drawings using a child's simple drawing tool which is the Spirograph, this is one example, it's called *Fanatic* 4500 minutes biro on paper.



The same motif is repeated step by step incrementally, building the image over an extended period of time, drawings titled by the total of the segments of time they took to make.



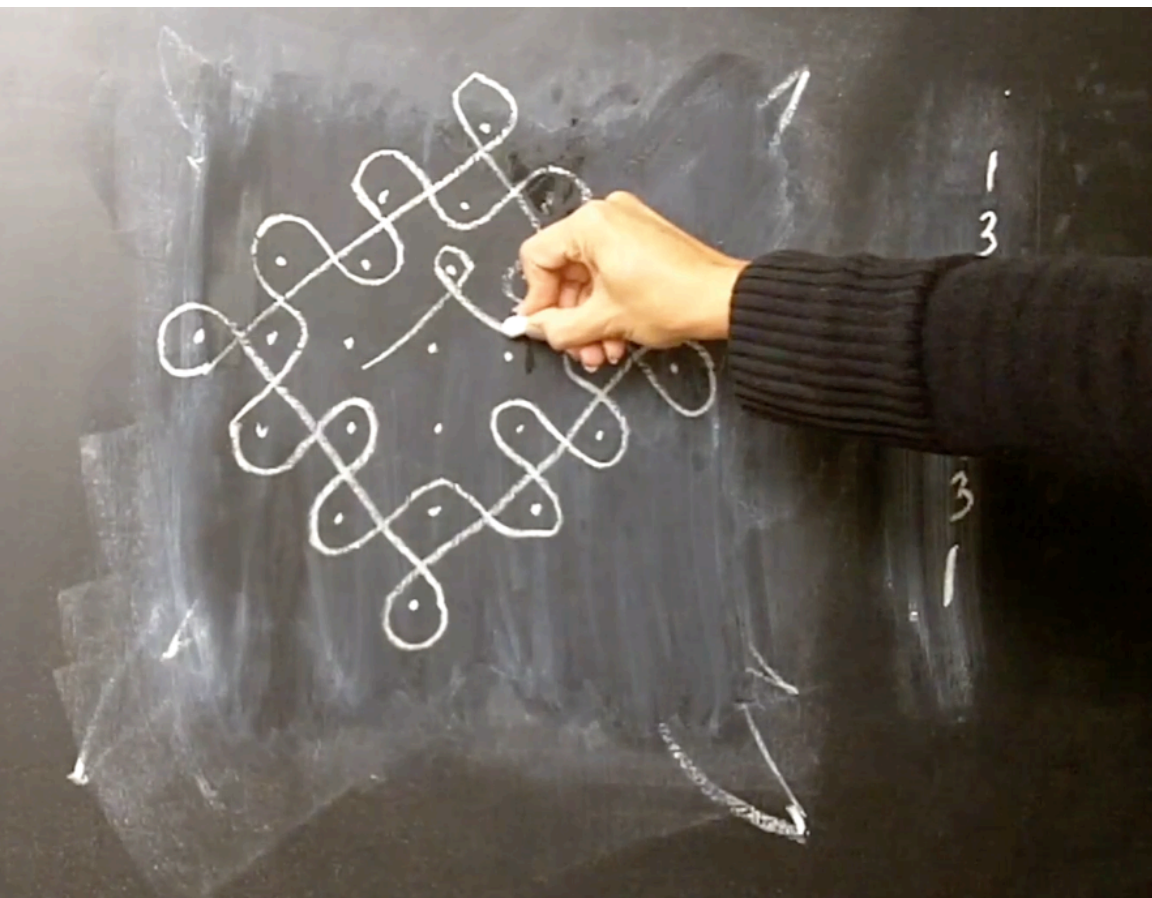
On closer inspection, the hand-madeness of the work is as much apparent as the mechanical, moments of hesitation or imperfection remain visible, moments when concentration wavered, my hands slipped, paper wore away or pens ran dry, accidents that counteract the mechanistic aspect of the process are not concealed but they're absorbed into the finished drawings.

Familiarity with this process allows me to draw effortlessly, when I sit down to Spirograph, it feels like coming home, as though the rhythm of the up and down movement of the pen nib as it rotates around its inner circle, it's been internalised somewhere deep within my psyche.

These drawings are pre-planned, I decide at the beginning how and where to start so once I sit down to draw, responsibility is handed over to the process, I'm not thinking about what to do next and there are certainly times during this drawing process when I drift off, I day dream, I think about other things.

Whilst the hands are busy, the mind is free to wander and it's though I'm working on an automatic pilot. But this wandering is very different to the space I described earlier, where an unexpected or surprising thing occurred on the canvas but both seem to tap into or draw on previous experiential knowledge, without us being conscious of the judgements that we're making.

This is perhaps a good point to introduce the final piece of work.



**Additive Trace**  
**16.00 minute**  
**(2015)**

So this is a video that evolved out of research into the construction of kolam drawings, those patterns traditionally drawn freehand around a matrix of dots made by Hindu women of Southern India. Once each image is completed, it's rubbed away and the next drawing begins but in contrast to the swift, competent gestures of the Hindu women, where rice flour expertly trickles through the fingertips as an even and continuous line, the video records and replays my mistakes and hesitations as the chalk squeaks, scrapes, snaps clumsily over the board.

[At this point a short section of the video was played whilst LH continued to talk]

This drawing process is unfamiliar to me. I pause to think about where to position the chalk, which direction to take the line, how to navigate the dots, there is no room for daydreaming here, I was having to concentrate far too much, yet there were moments when the chalk began to flow freely and I felt the rhythm of the convoluted lines and loops, a glimpse of how it may be for the women of Southern India, up, down, around to the side, up, down, around to the side.

The system slowly began to embed itself within the body as a series of gestures and movements that started to require less and less conscious thought, the rhythm was slowly being internalised.

[Stop video]



And just to end, I'm going to return to the Spirograph drawings. Over the years, I've found people are intrigued by the process and I've been asked numerous occasions, whether I go into a trance-like state when I draw. There's a tendency here to equate the repetitive drawing process with meditation, and whilst I do occasionally drift off in the way I described earlier, the truth is I'm soon jolted back to reality, my hand slips, a biro runs out of ink but ultimately, the process of drawing is far too painful for a prolonged absorption.

Finger joints, back, neck ache from holding the same fixed position, it's a physical

discomfort that very quickly brings me back to the present and I think there's an interesting tension between the absorption in a process on the one hand, and the disruptions or the glitches that jolt us out of that absorption.

In my own experience, there's only ever the possibility of entering that other space by and it was so nicely described by Schierenberg, as getting to the coalface and sticking at the coalface. In other words, by putting in the effort and the time to make work to push through the pain, through the discomfort, through the boredom, through the not knowing and only then do we create a space where there's the potential to lose ourselves, or is it to find ourselves, in the activity of making.