

Healing vibrations? Alma Rumball's visionary images

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Canadian artist Alma Rumball's (1902–1980) pictures of geometric symbols, Tibetan deities, images of the Holy Ghost, and representations of the Tree of Life have been conceived of as representations that facilitate a meditative process in viewers that can activate shifts in consciousness that promote physical and spiritual well-being. The award winning film “The Alma Drawings” premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in 2005 and describes some of Rumball's experiences as a woman and an artist living in Northern Ontario. While Rumball is portrayed as bewildered and perhaps suffering from an undiagnosed psychosis rather than as an innovative artist, Canadian director Jeremiah Munce has garnered a prestigious award for his documentary of her mediumistic work. Munce's presentation builds on and perpetuates negative stereotypes that serve to undermine visionary, outsider art produced by women artists.¹

Rumball's images have garnered limited academic notice and my inquiry offers a preliminary analysis of her work modeled around a feminist art historical interrogation. In this presentation I seek to relocate Rumball's art as an example of avant-garde outsider art and to uncover some of the ways her pictures disrupt ideas of conventional materialism, traversing boundaries of space and time to interrupt and reconfigure seemingly inflexible borders. I also want to argue that Rumball's artistic ability did not simply emerge out of an attack of madness; nor did it rely on

unconscious or unintentional movements. Rather, her skills were learned and perfected through practice.

The idea that ordinary physical boundaries might be disrupted through the intervention of unseen entities of the spiritual world is not a new concept and was an important component in the production of sacred imagery in Byzantine and Western European art from the 6th to the 13th centuries. Images used for devotional purposes, which decorated interior sacred spaces, were venerated as capable of performing miraculous acts and in some cases were believed to have originated in the heavenly spheres. Some images were considered to have been produced through the hand of God and therefore spiritually transformed through divine intervention. Historical women visionaries such as saint Hildegard of Bingen experienced transcendental occurrences in which she believed she was instructed by God to record her visions in a series of books and illuminated manuscripts.

More recently, mid-19th century artist Georgian Houghton made some of the first abstracted paintings, including *The Eye of God* (1862), and believed that she worked in collaboration with spiritual beings to produce pictorial conduits through which viewers might experience both physical and spiritual healing. In addition, Houghton's symbolically dense visionary paintings erased patriarchal restrictions that excluded women's participation in important religious activities. Early 20th century artist Ethel le Rossignol practiced the art of automatic drawing and painting and in her book *A Goodly Company* (1958) she provided an in-depth discussion about her inter-communication with disembodied entities to produce a visionary narrative that was meant to educate viewers about the reality of the spiritual spheres. And Hilma af Klint's large-scale mediumistic abstracted paintings were exhibited for the first time outside of Sweden at the

Camden Arts Centre in London England in 2006. Like Houghton and Le Rossignol, she also believed that she worked in concert with powerful spiritual beings to produce images that sought to educate and to facilitate physical and spiritual healing in viewers.

Similar to Rumball, the work of each of these artists was until recently simply ignored or ridiculed as the product of insanity. Alma Rumball's, images once disregarded are now compared with sacrosanct hieroglyphics found in ancient stones, thangka paintings, and sacred mandalas produced by Buddhist, Tibetan and Hindu masters. Her visionary images appear to mirror the repetitious curves, dots, concentric circles and spirals integrated into both ancient and contemporary sacred images believed to stimulate a healing, meditative response from viewers. Rumball's art was a result of her close association with artists and craftspeople and she acknowledged her paternal grandfather's aspirations stating that "he was a man of many artistic gifts...a splendid pen and ink cartoonist". Similarly, her maternal grandfather was an expert craftsman and exhibited on an international basis. Rumball spent much of her childhood working on her on her drawing and painting skills – a practice that she continued during her employment as school teacher.

Rumball re-located from her small farming community in the Muskokas to the busy center of Toronto where she spent several years gaining further artistic experience as a ceramic artist that specialized in painting decorative designs on fine porcelain. During this period she began to experience what she understood to be psychic visions which she interpreted through exegesis of the religious texts with which she was familiar. Rumball came to believe that she was in communion with spiritual beings that had instructed her to make images meant to instruct and to foster spiritual and physical well-being. Despite ample evidence of her training and

sophistication, extant narratives about Rumball and the nature of her images generally gloss over her years of artistic practice in favor of recurrent characterizations of her as both simple and child-like.

Contrary to narratives that highlight spontaneous mediumistic production brought about by clairvoyant and clairaudient experiences, Rumball's images *Starry Stairs* and *Dancing Lady* demonstrate her deliberate transition from naturalistic to abstracted imagery. The intricate patterning on the floors and walls incorporates the repetitive organic design patterns displayed on her decorative vases, and the verse etched into the lower corner of the picture presages her later intertextual visionary art in which she included written references that often merged with her abstracted, geometrical drawings.

Rumball's drawings, which she believed acted as portals between the spirit and the material worlds, evolved to include evermore complex repetitive circular and spiraling shapes. Artist Carmen Cereceda, and art historian Michael Greenwood were convinced of Rumball's ability to commune with the other-worldly and commented on the remarkable formal consistency of Rumball's mediumistic images, noting that no matter how intricately and densely woven, her renderings preserved the same harmonious cohesiveness found in art still lauded in the histories of Euro-Western visual culture. Rumball's familiarity with nature is evident in her vibrantly energetic *Fuchsia Joy* (1960) which depicts a densely layered intricately constructed garden filled with myriad organically shaped forms that appear to draw the viewer's eye into the center of the picture while simultaneously encouraging a more comprehensive perusal of the entire drawing. Rumball's central flower, contained in a porcelain vase, appears to be of the fuchsia variety and the combination of its saturated colour and its spiraling trajectory acts as a stabilizing form while simultaneously drawing attention to the shapes that surround it.

Rumball filled her picture with living things in the form of intricately patterned flower shapes within which she concealed a variety of creatures including pollinating bees and spiraling snail-like forms. The symbolism inherent in Rumball's images is worth noting; the presence of snails in a garden, for example, suggests a space that has been allowed to evolve naturally as opposed to one that is cultivated. Snails in mythology are associated with divination and symbolize rebirth, as their perceived ability to appear and disappear is consonant with the waxing and waning of the moon. From a psychological perspective the soft interior of a snail is related to the subconscious state while the hard exterior is connected with consciousness. Rumball's garden that rejects cultivation and remains close to nature allows for a more hospitable environment for a variety of species of plants and animals to live together in harmony. Her visionary image appears to embody notions about the interconnection of living things popularized by mid-19th - century transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson who believed that objects were made up of the same patterns at all levels of the cosmos and acted as a microcosm of the divine macrocosm. On initial examination of her picture, for example, Rumball appears to have produced an infinitesimal representation of entities seen only with the aid of a microscope. On closer inspection, however, the vase reminiscent of a massive tree trunk, its roots entrenched deeply in the soil and its wide-spread branches, the home of a variety of living beings, begin to take shape.

Rumball's pictures *Guardian of the East*, and *God of all Gods*, are dense with an array of increasingly multifaceted geometric signs and symbols that have been identified as reminiscent of particular markings used in sacred images that are found in different cultures throughout the world. In an effort to discover the meaning of some of her visionary symbols, Rumball's drawings were shown to a spiritual advisor to the Dalai Lama, Kalu Rinpoche, who identified

seven of the characters represented in Rumball's drawings as accurate depictions of Tibetan Gods and deities that had been rendered in the traditional positions and with the appropriate sacrosanct accoutrements including distinguishing mantels and headdresses. Kalu Rinpoche was particularly intrigued by *God of all Gods*, because rather than representing the deity in a full frontal portrait in the Western tradition, Rumball portrayed the divine being in profile as is stipulated in customs of Tibetan Buddhism.

Rumball's visionary images are also considered to embody qualities that are comparable to those characteristics embedded in Buddhist thangka paintings and sacred mandalas whose particular rhythms produced in the form of curves, dots and repetitive circles and spirals stimulate a meditative response from viewers. Thangka are constructed using a precise and ritualistic process in which grids of angles and intersecting lines are systematically transcribed onto a flat surface. These intricately rendered images often include depictions of a variety of symbols in the form of religious objects, animals and human figures. Thangka are filled with symbolism and artists are expected to have a thorough knowledge of the symbolic significance of each element of the final image. Tibetan painted or embroidered sacred imagery serve as teaching tools and depict segments of the lives of religious figures while they also disseminate the messages of important deities. These pictures offer visual manifestations of the divine and serve as meditative tools meant to encourage viewers towards transcendental enlightenment.

Similarly the mandala, or representations of the magic circle, can be found throughout history and in various forms including Christian representations of the apostles as well as in Indigenous Aboriginal spiritual practices. Traditionally, mandalas have been used to focus concentration in meditative practice in an effort to stimulate the effects of the individuation process facilitating a state of transcendental perfection. As with the designs in thangka paintings and mandalas, the

elaborately rendered forms in Rumball's drawings were meant to act as meditative tools to be absorbed by viewers over an extended period of time. As a result of a fascination with discoveries about the nature of the content of Rumball's visionary drawings, spiritual leaders and scholars of the scientific and medical communities continue to conduct examinations of her extraordinary images in an ongoing effort to unlock the densely coded content of her symbols. In the meantime, spiritual teachers of many different faiths and belief systems have characterized Rumball's pictures as subliminal activation drawings that were created to generate feelings of peace and to facilitate healing in viewers.

Despite relative obscurity, works produced by mediumistic artists have been used as templates from which lauded modernists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian drew inspiration for their own artistic production. Art work produced by self-proclaimed visionary artists including Alma Rumball who believed their art was channeled from the spiritual spheres has, in the twenty first century, been labeled as "fringe", "outsider" and/or evocative of "some form of insanity" rather than as an expression of the avant-garde. Conversely, artists Kandinsky and Mondrian whose work also benefits from knowledge of the occult sciences enjoyed successful careers and are celebrated as the precursors, or more precisely the "fathers" of modern art. Jon Thompson, curator of the 2006 exhibition *Inner Worlds Outside* held at Whitechapel Gallery in London in 2006 characterized visionary art as an example of outsider art which is indistinguishable from avant-garde art. In addition, he posits high modernism as born out of the "radical breaking point" or interstitial fissure created through the production of mediumistic art. Despite such revelations about the potential of mediumistic art as inspiration, visionary artists such as Alma Rumball continue to be characterized as mentally unbalanced or childlike.

Growing interest in the possible meanings of Rumball's pictures has led to conclusions that her images may well have the capacity to heal on an energetic level and that this ability is facilitated through an unconscious meditative exchange between her pictures and those who come in contact with them. In addition, religious and spiritual practitioners theorize that each of Rumball's pictures has been encoded with symbols that may accelerate the ascension of humanity. Despite the incredulous nature of the idea of an interconnection and interaction between the material and the spiritual world, Rumball believed that she produced figurative and abstracted images in an attempt to describe life in the heavenly spheres, while also offering solace and healing in the material world. Contemporary spiritual teachers of different faiths and belief systems characterize Rumball's visionary images as subliminal activation drawings produced for the peace and healing of all civilizations.

Rumball as the only woman artist included in the first major survey of Canadian "Outsider Art" at the exhibition, "Outsider Coming In" held at the Art Gallery of Mississauga in the summer of 2006 was included in a newly developed online site "Gallery of Canadian Drawing Masters" whose aim is to introduce the works of innovative Canadian artists. Rumball's work has been exhibited throughout Canada and on an international level including in the United States, England, France, Australia, and Beijing. Twenty-first-century viewers are beginning to experience a resurgence of interest in mediumistic representations such as those produced by outsider artists including Alma Rumball. Perhaps one of the reasons is the inherent transitional and potential disruptive nature of visionary images that circumvent any definitive and perhaps reductive conclusions, thus perhaps encouraging further contemporary interrogation of Outsider Art.

ⁱ Thanks to Wendy Oke for supporting my research on Alma Rumball's art.