

Elusiveness and the Presence of Essence: Rethinking Trappler's '*Notions of Being/Moments of Being*' from a Heideggerian Perspective

by

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Abstract

This work is a combination of principles from Fine Arts and Philosophy on the study of 'Being' by South African artist Jill Trappler in a solo exhibition entitled *Notions of Being/Moments of Being*. The selected artworks from the exhibition is investigated through the theoretical framework of Martin Heidegger's theory of 'Being' as both immanent and elusive. The paper resolves the outer-inner-worlds conflicts inherent in Jill Trappler's *Notions of Being/Moments of Being* by adopting a hermeneutical approach from the iconography and iconological tools of description. The paper recommends that because artistic creations are containers of deeper meanings, they should be deeply interrogated beyond the mimetic representation of objective reality in order to grasp the deeper and more powerful purposes of art, and therefore, it is argued that the paper opens up possibilities for further interpretation of non-figurative works and specifically Trappler's through the contextualizing of tools and frameworks that provide an interpretation.

Keywords: Being, elusive, Heidegger, hermeneutics, Jill Trappler

Introduction

It is possible that the body of work that constitutes Jill Trappler's *Notions of Being/Moments of Being* was inspired by Virginia Woolf's autobiographical book entitled *Moments of Being*. This is evidently captured in the first part of the exhibition's title as stated above. Considering the similarity of purpose which presents the latter as a visual materialization of the former and a certain coterie connection existing among artists using the verbal and the visual mode of expression, one will have no choice than to infer that Trappler may have read the book. There appear to be a re-embodiment of essence from Wolfe to Trappler. The artist had contemporized the essence of notions of being through a painterly experience by evoking the energy of paint materials in order to transform the idea of semblance into the realm of reality. Our task however in this essay, is not to compare or interrogate Trappler through Wolfe, rather, we are interrogating Trappler's *Notions of Being/Moments of Being* from the framework of Martin Heidegger's theory of 'Being'. In this paper, we adopt the descriptive tools of iconography- iconology as well as Heidegger's hermeneutic method to interrogate the essence of 'being' as it is reflected on Trappler's *Notions of Being/Moments of Being*. This framework allows us an adequate paradigm towards understanding the hidden contents of Trappler's work beyond the beautiful organization of the elements of art.

Presenting Heidegger's Notion of Being

For Heidegger, art is a reflection which leads to the understanding of being as 'Being'. This is the route through which Heidegger overcame the limitation of aesthetics occurring in Plato and Aristotle metaphysics. Through this, Heidegger invalidated Plato's denigrating role of the art as an imitation and his planned expulsion of artists from the utopian republic. Contrary to Plato, Heidegger is of the view that art is not an imitation or limited to aesthetics, but that art leads to 'being'. This view was complimented by Nwodo (1977) when he observed that, "art and technology are epochal manifestations of Being, both being rooted upon the essence of truth as *aletheia*" (p. 18).

Heidegger (1976) sums up the idea of a work of art by noting that, "there must always be some being in the open (the clearing), something, in which the openness takes its stand and attains its constancy" (p. 61). The above indicates the essential relationship between the work of art and the essence of truth as unconcealment. 'Being' from the Heideggerian perspective becomes simultaneously elusive and accessible. Thus, this forms the basis for understanding the unconcealment provided in Trappler's work as emanating from the effective organization of the elements of art by the artist in order to create special things. We maintain that these special things as 'being' are cultural paradigms. A cultural paradigm collects the scattered practices of the group, unifies them into coherent possibilities for actions and holds them up to the people who can then act and relate to each other in terms of such instances.

A work of art as a cultural item performs this function not merely as representations of objective reality, but also produces a template by which readers within a community attach their experiences as the concretization of truth. It is within this sense that Trappler's '*Moments of Being*' expresses the rubric of Heidegger's position on art in '*Notions of Being/Moments of Being*' that unconceals the truth about the situations painted by the artist when she notes that:

The act of painting, mixing color, the rhythm and the poetry is as important as the "things" painted. Painting is an image of itself; it has an objective existence of its own. It does not need to contain an object and does not need to represent anything. As a painter, I seek the inner life of the painting. It may simply be a place in time where the viewer if anything may attach a dream! The painting is the something not necessarily about something. The works of some abstract impressionists and some rock art have influenced my practice and approach (Trappler, 2009, p. 2).

'Being' as a referential state in the artistic form refers to the presence of energy. It is an essence that carries tangible and intangible presence and is not limited to the description of concrete reality for expression. The work of art stems from the artist's inner space, bridges the outer and inner worlds, and materializes them as realities. The above notion is congruent with the thought that "the art is born of the spirit and it is of spiritual nature, but in the work of art the spirit reaches the non-spiritual, the sensible/material" (Pozo, 2012, p. 823). From the ongoing, our focus on some selected works from Trappler's solo exhibition mentioned above is with the aim to present a materialization of Heidegger's perspective on the philosophical subject of 'being' to understand the being in her paintings as an essence that "sets truth to work" (Heidegger, 1977) and creates the 'thing' through which truth emerges.

'Moments of Being' states the co-presence of the thing (physical or mental) and the something (organization of artistic elements) that makes the being to be presented through painting. This is embedded in the symbolism that lines, textures, rhythms, and colors evoke on the viewer's sensibility. Works in '*Notions of Being/Moments of Being*' "ask the viewer to immerse the eyes with color and surface, to swim lightly, in and out, up and down, back and forth in the line and tone, rhythms' and poetry of the image" (Trappler, 2009, p.3).

Contextualizing “*Moments of Being*”

‘*Moments of Being*’ is here engaged as a reframing of Heidegger’s ‘Being’ through the transmuted materiality of colors and other elements of art. ‘*Lavender Rain*’, ‘*Mid Summer morning*’, ‘*Dawn Hummed in*’, ‘*Sunny Side of the Moon*’ and ‘*The Sweetness of this Juice*’, all provide a materialization of the theoretical basis from which a new understanding of being will subsist. In the above sense, an artistic work can lead us to the understanding of ‘Being’ as the origin from which the artwork stems forth, and not just as a mere thing.

When Heidegger talks about the origin of the work of art, “origin” in this sense refers to the place from which and by which something is, what it is (Alawa, 2017, p. 67). A hermeneutical and iconographical-iconological reading of the works mentioned above is necessary at this point. Our analyses rely on the organization of the elements of art, especially color and the emotions they evoke in the viewer’s mind. This is because color has inexhaustible ramification which unfolds in lore and when contextualized in cultures it contains deep symbolical meanings across time and space. Through these, iconological inferences are derived as a handle for the interpretation of cultural materials.

In *Lavender Rain*, one encounters an apt referencing of symbolical associations with a certain connection to a past that is special to the present. The dominating pinkish purples doused with swathes of bluish purple colors hint of some experiences that remain locked in the mental realm. Symbolically, lavender as a color suggests nostalgia which Herman Cerrato observes “works well for businesses selling old lace, sentimental handmade craft items, and antique goods” (2012, p. 14). So, we take it that the lavender in Trappler’s painting recalls memories as objects to be shared. On a first encounter with the painting, the impression is akin to a close-up of a thicket of flowers that announces the coming of springtime. Another look reveals a renewing feeling of purity that accompanies the Easter celebration of Christians. All these hint to recalling the past towards a renewing of the present.

In-between the dominating lavender hues are connecting amber, bumblebee, lemon and golden-yellow hues which cascade from top to the bottom of the vertical shaped painting. A soothing lilac with more bluish orientations than purple balances the high-pitched colors of yellow and pinks. This creates a yin-yang effect between the warm and cool colors. The dominance of purple within overflowing lavender provides a clearing for viewers to anchor their interpretation of a lavender rain. Tension is created by the furious movements of the pallet knives and brush strokes to reveal a spontaneous overflow of kinesthesia. This stimulates an elusive *de ja vous* in both the artist and her viewers to continually search for *Lavender Rain* under the paint surfaces. The overall effect of this triadic color scheme is the feeling of youthful vitality and vigor as nostalgic moments for rejuvenation of the mind.

Furthermore, although patriarchal leadership is associated with lavender, the effective combination of saturated pinky-rose and intense yellow hues signal the sensuous presence of femininity; untouched and not violated by the vagaries of time. Could this be the constant invocation to a past encounter with things? A feeling that triggers our sense of smell, touch and above all, stimulates a recollection of the senses to make the past function in the present? However, for whatever reason that the artist combines her choice of colors through effective compositional strategies, the painting succeeds in opening up multiple interpretations that stem from a viewer's personal and psychological state of mind. This is the truth about the notion of 'being' set to work by a skillful deployment of artistic elements.



Fig.1. *Lavender Rain*, Acrylic on canvas 2009, 715cm x 1385 cm.

Sunnyside of the Moon materializes Heidegger's view on knowing as an origin of truth about our world through art. Heidegger underscored the reason that knowing the 'what' behind being is the truth about something which puts one in a better position to know what to do with the knowledge of what is the truth (Origin, 66-68). Trappler consciously or inadvertently put her knowledge of the symbolism of yellow color schemes against hints of other saturated warm colors in presenting the truth about the sunny side of the moon. It is clear from the title of the painting and the feelings evoked that Trappler is alluding to happiness and warmth. In her use of bright pinks, oranges, and tints of blue colors, the work share similarities in color theme with Vincent van Gogh's paintings of shoe. This presents more narratives than the character of yellow is associated with and stimulates upbeat emotions which reveal the hidden energy of the moon that dispels darkness and creates a romantic moment when the moon is full.

The ancient Egyptians had associated yellow with the source of light. Though in certain parlances, yellow suggests cowardice (Cerrato, 2012, p.7), the artist used yellow for its positive connotations. Yellow as the color of the sun symbolizes “energy, warmth, and summer sunlight with its implication of agility, blossom or extroversion” (Okoronkwo. 2017, p.111). The dominance of intense yellow hues alongside saturated tints of white and orange colors in the painting creates an overall joyous and happy mood. *Sunnyside of the Moon*, in the above context, becomes a node which evokes meaning through the application of the elements of art and the artist’s ability to organize them creatively.

Technically, Trappler demonstrated her understanding of the psychological effect of colors in creating a mood. The moon in Trappler’s painting becomes an intense reminiscence of children gathering for moonlight tales or lovers sharing memorable moments. Trappler seems to be materializing the neurophysiological effects by placing adjacent colors of yellow and blue to simulate a perception of orange and violet shadows from the contrasting interactions.

Let us compare Heidegger’s analysis of Van Gogh’s portrayal of a pair of peasant shoes to the effect generated by this painting. Heidegger had demonstrated a strong attachment to Van Gogh’s painting of the peasant shoe and had gone further to use it severally as an illustration to show the extent to which an artwork confronts internal and abstract realities. Van Gogh’s shoes show the equipmental being of the shoes as an instrument used by a peasant and “not through the observation of the actual use of shoes as it occurs here and there” (Heidegger, 2002, p.15). In this painting, Van Gogh portrayed the history of a particular shoe alongside the history of the user. This enacts empathy with the experiences of the shoe and presents it as a thing that has other realities to the extent of empowering the viewer with the history of the shoe. In the same vein, *Sunnyside of the Moon* calls to mind a shared knowledge that the moon derives its illumination from the sun, but unlike the heat and dryness associated to the sun, the moon’s appearance is always cool and romantic for lovers and reminiscences.



Fig. 2. *Sunnyside of the Moon*, Acrylic on canvas, 2007/2009, 2310 x 1800 cm.

Mid-Summer Morning. The large-scale abstract work would have appeared divided into two paintings due to the application of two techniques with varying color densities and textural simulation of a crowded landscape but for the colorful areas around the top and downwards to the bottom of the painting. Here she demonstrates an uncanny dexterity in the way she harmonizes these two portions to create two aspects of a midsummer morning. She further balances her composition by creatively allowing the vermilion hues to compliment the dense area of greens and blues. This creates a split complimentary harmony whereby the red color hue peeps from a thicket of green-lushes as though a blossoming of petals unfold within a rich environment of green vegetation of the flowery plants.

In *Mid-Summer Morning*, Trappler used dense blues and greens to create the image of a vegetal tropical environment. Just like a two-themed tale of a city, *Mid Summer Morning* presents the two flip sides of the same setting. One agitated with dense blues, greens and interspersed with yellows. This presents an ominous concentration of dark and cool color schemes at the top left corner which eases out as they shift towards the right-hand corner of the canvas surface. The other is warm-hearted with bright colors of orange, red and lighter tones of the same colors. This presents a transition of yellows with variety of tints and shades which link the left to the right side of the painting surfaces.



Fig. 3. *Mid Summer Morning*, Acrylic on canvas 2009, 1750 x 2500 cm.

The colors, forms, lines, dots, and textures, points toward an aura of meaning; being, connection, and longing towards a reality. This is akin to a reality that presents an elusive, heightened temporality and physicality when walking into a midsummer morning with floral experiences. This is experienced as the comingling and tumbling out from a sensory world into the material world. Trappler denudes forms of physical reality from ‘*Lavender Rain*,’ *Mid Summer Morning*, ‘*Dawn Hummed in*, ‘*Sunny Side of the Moon*, ‘*The Sweetness of this Juice*’ and the other works in the exhibition. She succeeds at reenacting the truth about the conditions behind her themes. Her work agrees with David Jones assertion that a successful abstract painting of a mountain “is not a representation of a mountain, it is ‘mountain’ under the form of paint” (cited in Phillipson, 1985, P. 5).

Trappler’s ‘*Notions of Being/Moments of Being*’ is a movement towards harnessing artistic elements and creative concepts into an intrinsic system of meaning where sense springs from the viewer’s internal experiences. The consequence is the immanence of presence untainted by external forces of physical reality. By exploring the essence of being, Trappler reopens the energy of noetic perception of the artwork as that which exists in a sublime state. The function of the artwork within this understanding is superior to its unfortunate and banal purpose as a visual memorandum hung on the metaphoric cross of museums and galleries. Looking at these works, we were confronted with an awesome feeling of being somewhere familiar yet strange; it’s like experiencing a *de ja vous* from an *aletheia*. This generates a magical feeling that there are unconcealments of experiences from the painting as things that can be taken to influence beingness in a corporeal world.

Engaging the Discourse of the Elusive Being in a Non-Figurative Artwork

Poets such as William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge have argued that art expresses the sublime through using the accessories of beauty. During the eighteenth-century Romanticism in Western Europe, the above notion became a long-standing treatise for understanding the works of art. The artist then was a genius, a Greek deity, a person with unlimited and transcendental ability to create things from nothingness. Ironically, the same civilization sustained the platonic view of art as mimesis when art only copies from an existing reality. Currently, this notion is being dismantled by subsequent cultural understandings such as late modernism, postmodernism, and the current contemporary era. With new opening up of the portals of artistic enterprises to sharing authorial basis, one can say that the artist only leaves an open-ended work which even the public will continually strive to fill-in the gaps. Thus the contemporary art under this regime generate its reality as *a priori* from perception. This obviates the platonic construct of mimesis and hence opens up Heidegger as a theoretical framework to see more truth about reality as one deeply engages Trappler's work.

Art connects human experiences in the super-sensory; adds axiology and epistemological value to understanding the mundane from partly transcendental and finite perspectives. Heidegger's attack of Platonism presented a true value of art which "sets truth to work". It is this project to counter the nihilism in Plato's presentation that realigns Heidegger's notion of the truth about art with Friedrich Nietzsche's counter privileging of the Platonist-Christian super-sensory realm of truth as being utterly exclusive of the lived experience. Accordingly, James Magrini observes that what follows is "a reevaluation of the metaphysical standard of truth and an initiation towards a "physiological" aesthetics" (2009, p. 118). He further suggests that this tends to accomplish an inversion of "Platonism's value system by removing the super-sensuous from a position of importance" (ibid).

Thus, a painting presents a discursive visualization of paints and other elements of art as a condition for the emergence of truth. Through this, the artist refers to the metaphysics of being inferred through other internal and external forces of the human mind. The co-presence of transcendental and finite experiences in *'The Sweetness of this Juice'* or *'Lavender Rain'* is not only located within the memories of the viewer about them, they are also in the viewer's experiences of them as first-hand knowledge of perception and feeling. What the artist has done is to (re)present them through visual imageries on canvas by expressing an evocation of the present-ness of being.

The way 'Being' chooses to reveal itself depends on the context. In another account, Heidegger's constant dialogue with the strategic manipulation of poetic elements in Holderlin's poem reveals the immanence of 'being' as the consequence of the poet's understanding of context and creative manipulation of poetic elements to present *aletheia*. Holderlin succeeded at creating *aletheia* through words which contributes to Heidegger's reference to the poet as 'the poet of poets'.

Similarly, Trappler as ‘a painters’ painter’ had effectively engaged the elements of art to present the thingness of ‘being’ through the process of mixing colors; materializing rhythms, separating the life of the painting from an objective reality of forms and boldly demonstrating that painting “does not need to contain an object and does not need to represent anything” (Trappler, 2009, p. 2).

Michael Lazarin notes that Heidegger questions mimesis in the art as claimed by the Platonic school of thoughts and ask if this refers to the correspondence with idea and thing (aedequatio, homoiosis) which he counters that art is not “imitation, representation or reproduction of anything already existing” (2008, p.52). He further, observed that Heidegger had interrogated the issue of the classical Greek definition of art as “imitation of nature, where imitation means aedequatio, homoiosis (correspondence of idea and thing)” (2008. P.52). He notes that art ‘sets truth to work’ and is not limited to beauty or the sublime, neither is it an imitation, representation or reproduction of anything already existing (p.52). This to some extent locates the traditional African perception of the essentiality of thoughts and deep meaning in the artistic work.

Deducing from the above, the important question is where do we find Trappler’s ‘*Notions of Being/Moments of Being*’? Is it within the present-ness and temporal-ness of truth about the viewer’s experiences of the body of her work? Or by the super-sensory connection with the elements of design which instigate feelings in the viewer’s mind? Yet one may also ask if they simply go deeper than the physicality of things as ‘being’? Is this the obfuscation that non-Catholics feel in understanding the ritual of the Eucharist which explains “the system of belief that operates within a Eucharistic metaphor” (Okoronkwo, 2001, p.9)? Herein, no empirical proof is needed to verify the substance held uploads by the priest in a chalice when he announces ‘Behold! The lamb of God who takes away the sins...’ (p.56).

Ironically, an axiological in-road to the ritual purification of the art audience from the impurities of the platonic tainting is cleansed by an abstract journey into realms of a deeper super-sensory world. This becomes like the blood of Jesus which sanctifies the lives of Christians to a new state of purity. This is where one understands Heidegger’s counter-Platonic stand and position of ‘time and being’ as a latent theory to frame ‘*Notions of Being/Moments of Being*’. At this juncture, it is simplistic to connect our interpretation of the elusive being in Trappler’s work to Nietzsche’s position of the atrophic understanding of the work of art as that which fosters a “most fecund and efficacious discharge of the will-to-power” (Magrini 2009, p.119).

Conclusion

To make meaning of Trappler's *'Moments of Being'*, one should understand Heidegger on art. For Heidegger, Being is elusive but for Trappler art is also elusive and has the moment of Being. The deduction from "Van Gogh's shoes of the peasant" reveals the condition of the peasant who walked in those shoes while working on earth. Thus the artist presents a special connection to essence as *aletheia* through which the experiences of the peasant; time, shoe and environment appear to the viewer as unconcealment. Van Gogh's shoes of the peasant explicate a typical Heideggerian mode of Being: of useful artifacts, of natural things and of works of fine art. We, therefore, summarize that Trappler's work is a veritable materialization of Heidegger's theory of being through the way they set truth to work by creative arrangements of artistic elements. *Moment of Being* as a body of work stems from the artist's inner space which connects to the non-spiritual, the sensible or material world and presents its message as the thing under the form of paint.

In our contemporary age where technology redefines even the essence of humanity, someone need to look deeply into Trappler's oeuvre to feel the inner life of the paintings and discern its place in time "where the viewer, if anything may attach a dream" (Trappler, 2009, p.2). In this way, Trappler's work had formed part of an overcoming of the metaphysics and the ontological difference in the 'notions' and 'moments' of being. Just like in Woolf's memoir, Trappler's visual poetry is addressing the diversity of purposes by using a diversity of materials to reach different audiences and occasions. These works have presented the reality of being as thoughts and sensibilities via the materiality of the elements of art. If Martin Heidegger was to write his theory of 'being' about the present time, he may have found Trappler's work as a worthy framework which will surely accommodate a new understanding of iconography and iconology of art in a contemporary era. Thus, our investigation of Trappler's work show the multiple layering of meanings presented by the artist through a non-figurative presentation of 'Being' as a state of reality, and quite naturally, it needs further interrogations to open other portals of meanings embedded in the paintings.

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