

**Jill Slaymaker: The Art of Infinite Connections**  
**By Leslie Wines**  
**New York**

“It would be strange if a single ear of corn grew in a large plain or there were only one world in the infinite.”  
— *Metrodorus of Chios, philosopher of ancient Greece*

BEFORE Manhattan artist Jill Slaymaker began her early 1990s series of vinyl and oil paintings contrasting scientific and artistic views of nature, she regarded science with a form of distrust common among artists, suspecting it lacked aesthetics and a social conscience. At that time it seemed to her that art and science sprang from irreconcilably different ways of perceiving life and worked at cross purposes. But she has since found common ground.

“When I first started these paintings, I researched different views of nature,” she said. “The early humans were so interesting. They saw nature as a wondrous, inexplicable, awesome presence, something to be worshipped. But in more recent times, it seems that Western man has wanted to control nature; to diagram, categorize and classify it. It seems as if the idea was to reduce nature into a new little package that could be understood and controlled. I was repelled by that approach.”

“But,” she continued, “as I continued to read, I encountered many interesting Western scientific ideas. I came across chaos theory, sixteenth-century Italian drawings of the body and the Renaissance concept of alchemy. I realized that many Western scientists also respected nature.

“I’ve now come to think that there is a strong relationship between scientists and artists as people, because both use materials in an experimental way without knowing what the outcome will be. Scientists and artists both have great curiosity and both want to explore the mysteries of the universe. And, of course, Buddhism becomes very important here because it places a great emphasis on the interconnectedness of life and the many connections that exist in the universe.”

The Buddhist emphasis on integration or the interconnectedness of all things comes up often in Jill’s conversation and has profoundly influenced her paintings. Like many other Buddhists, she began her practice at a point when the world appeared to her to be broken into parts that could not be easily reassembled into a reassuring whole; as if scientists and artists might forever remain destructively polarized. However, over the course of her practice, she has come to understand how ideas and people that seem to be opposed are, in fact, linked. This confidence in the world’s wholeness informs many of her paintings with a strong sense of tranquillity.

IN addition, Buddhism’s reverence for nature has enabled Jill to rediscover her own joy in nature, another important source of inspiration in her work. The sky and other sweeping expanses of natural space are often depicted in her recent paintings. Although she grew up in Indiana, in close proximity to woods, Jill, after a long spell of urban living, found that she had become alienated from nature. “I always loved nature, particularly the sky,” she added. “I went to graduate school in Texas, where the skies are just incredible. Buddhism put me back in touch with how important nature is to me.”

Jill sometimes incorporates dhist terms and imagery into her work. “Waves of

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Kosen-rufu," depicting a giant sound wave, was inspired by the idea that the peace of the entire world can emanate from within one person. "Cause and Effect" features a large and mysterious circle set against a dark but somehow luminous night sky, and also hints at the myriad connections within the universe.

Jill describes "Cause and Effect" as her "transitional painting," which links the pre- and post-Buddhist eras of her work, noting that although it contains a certain darkness and heaviness, it also foreshadows the lighter quality of her newer paintings.

I appear in the world  
like a great cloud  
that showers moisture upon  
all the dry and withered living beings,  
so that all are able to escape suffering,  
gain the joy of peace and security,  
the joys of this world and the joys of Nirvana  
(*The Lotus Sutra*, "The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs" chapter, p. 102)

BEFORE I chanted my paintings had a dark, surreal nightmarish quality," Jill recalls. "At times my work was even grotesque, although always with some little saving touch of humor. These paintings mirrored the condition of my mind, which was generally very depressed, even suicidal at times."

In Jill's view, Buddhism has given her much more than an interesting set of concepts for viewing life or developing her art. It has provided her with the tools to literally remake her own consciousness and route out serious and deeply rooted mental sufferings. □