

Mira Hunter on the practical side of making art



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As told to Resham Mantri, 3648 words.

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A lot of your art, at least in the beginning, focused on the traditional Sufi art of whirling. What I found interesting about how you described it was its use as meditation, which differs from a modern Western approach to meditation, which often involves sitting and clearing the mind of thoughts. You've also spoken about your feeling that when you whirl you experience the world as still and you observe your environment from the eye of a hurricane. Can you talk about whirling and what it means to you in terms of your exploration of time and how it all got started?

I learned it when I was about 16 from my father, who had been studying whirling since he was in his early 20s. My father has always felt that whirling is an ideal meditation for people who have difficulty standing still because you need all of your body to be activated. You're consumed with trying to maintain this form, which is challenging. It allows your mind another, maybe more accessible, form of stillness. It pushes you and your mind further, which I think is not exclusive to whirling. It can be through any kind of intense physical activity.

I had seen whirling growing up because it was all around me, even when I was very little. We lived across the street from the tekke in North Vancouver, which was the house for prayer and whirling in North Vancouver at the time. I can remember these blurry moments of being three years old and seeing people's feet twirling and the smell of certain incense and the colors that were there with the candlelight.

When our group split apart, I didn't see any until I was much older. I think I was about 13 or 14 when I saw my father perform at UBC. He was always testing the boundaries. He was on an elevated stage, and would he would take one foot and put it on the edge of the stage, so his toe would be off the stage. There was this tenseness, and it was really powerful. I can remember then thinking, "This is what I want to do."

I didn't really have access to it until I graduated from high school. I went to the Vancouver Waldorf School, where part of your graduation process was that you created this project that had an oral component, a written component that was bound—a thesis—and an artistic component. I knew that I wanted to go into University and study art at that time. Right then, I hadn't really put the two together. They were very separate practices. One was our family culture and the other was something that I felt really drawn to as an individual. I decided to do my grade twelve project on death and the experiences that we have after death. It felt like a perfect match, because "whirling dervish" translates as "at the threshold." It's about straddling this liminal space between living and death.



Public whirling at Grand Central Station in NYC - 'Other time-based pieces include durational performances, such as two hours of whirling in main hall of Grand Central Station. I am interested in what transpires when the body and mind are engaged in physically intense extremes: what happens to one when the other gives out?'

The first time I whirled for a really long time, I think it was maybe three hours, and I can remember having this sense that it was easier to stay whirling than to stop. I can remember whirling over to a table and picking up a glass of water, and then setting it back down. It felt like this very natural experience.

But there is also a very strange space that happens—a feeling I'm more aware of after something traumatic, like a car accident or something happens—where it seems like there's this slowness. You feel like that accident was totally avoidable, even though it was just a split second. You feel like everything is slowed down. That is kind of the same sense you have with whirling. It's this interior space, where if allow yourself to let go, there's a different sense of time.

Whirling was part of your culture, and what you loved, but you were also using it as an artistic medium to explore death and time. When you're in the moment, do you have to switch gears in your mind at all to experience it one way, to use it for the art, or is it a similar experience for you?

It can be a very similar experience, and that's what I try to hold on to. When I first started whirling it was such a powerful experience. I felt like if I whirled more than around 10 minutes, I was on a different planet afterwards. I would feel extremely emotional, I would need to be alone.

After I started performing with a troupe, and traveling all over Europe, living in Istanbul, I was at all of these events and I got so kind of good at whirling that it was almost difficult to push my mind into that emotional state. There's some real benefits and negatives to that kind of control. There was such a paradigm shift in the way I approached whirling. I was initially really kind of depressed about it, not being able to access that liminal space so effortlessly. I had to shift how I thought about it. Instead of thinking about my own liminal experience, I started to think of it more as a liminal experience that I could share with an audience. How can I create that emotional space so that I can draw everyone in with me?

It's incredible how effective it is. I don't think everybody's sensitive to whirling, but it would be like being in kind of a concert setting. There would be a handful of people that would be really emotionally touched. It

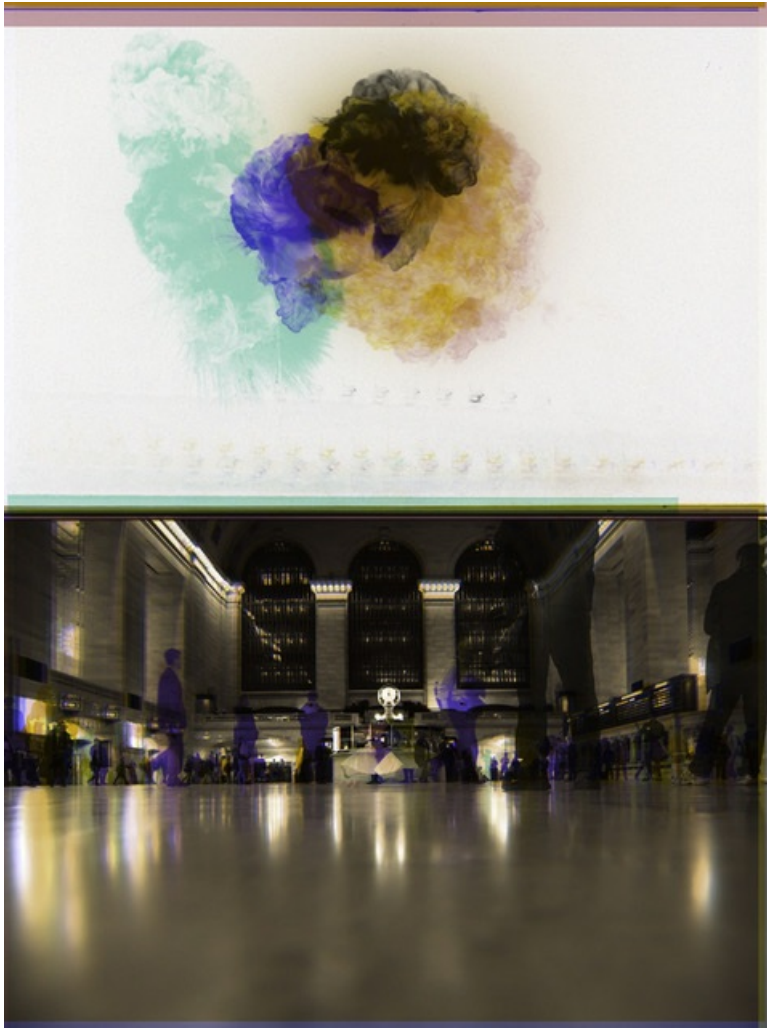
would always be connecting with those people was kind of gave me the sense that I was still doing the right thing.

There's this ongoing conversation within whirling, they call it the Teahouse Dervish. Are you one of the Teahouse Dervishes? It's considered the lower kind of dervish, versus the higher kind of dervish that only does it in this really pristine, spiritual setting. I hate the idea that architecture or location would somehow guarantee a higher spiritual experience, because I think that is absolutely untrue for the viewer, for art, or for a spiritual practice. I really feel that if you're not blurring those lines, you're not creating an authentic experience for anyone.

When you were in New York, in 2009, you were working with several other New York based artists to launch the Waterpod, a floating sculptural eco-habitat built on a deck barge where systems were installed to generate food, water, and energy. It was both a piece of art, as well as sort of an exploration of new models of living in a future of rising tides and environmental destruction, using DIY technologies and promoting self-sufficiency. What did you learn through that process of working with other artists, working on a project of that scale, working with city agencies?

It was incredible how hard Mary Maddingly worked on all of that. She was doing so much of the liaison work with the city. We wanted to keep chickens, and it was during the avian flu epidemic... We wanted a public, artist-made place where people could come and stay the night with our chickens, and everyone's just so terrified.

My husband Derek Hunter was the lead builder and did a lot of the physical design work. Because we had to be certified as a boat. It was like working to meet code for being a boat, for being wheelchair accessible because we were a public museum. We used soil that was made by parks, recycled soil, so it had a lot of the detritus of an urban city environment in it. There were so many different hurdles. Having our grey-water recycling system, and then making it... It had to be pulled around by a tugboat to all the different locations. There were storms. So much of it would get damaged depending on where it was docked. There were all of these different, amazing restrictions.



Public whirling at Grand Central Station in NYC

In our beautiful, utopian plans in the beginning, it was like a really high-end, experimental space that anybody who lives in New York might even prefer to live in, because, wow, now you're on the water. That was definitely an incredible aspect of it. But in 2009 we had the financial markets crash. As a result, we had such an incredible wealth of volunteers, because there was all these people that lost their jobs. Professional architects, and lawyers, and others would come and have that kind of real hands-on experience. That was really great, but we couldn't get any funding. Our funding was so limited.

We worked a lot with Materials For The Arts. For our siding we used old semi-transparent backdrops from soap operas. You'd have a whole wall of blurry autumn leaves, or a burgundy café bar scene, or something like that, and then we'd be cutting out and attaching it to the outside. It was built in the Brooklyn Navy yard; we kind of lived there for quite a while. The workers were so supportive that when they would have breaks in their own schedule they would bring over their equipment and help us. That's where Derek really learned how to do arc welding. He had this unbelievable welder who didn't speak any English who would come and just weld beside Derek, and he would learn from him. It was an incredible community experience.

Were you trying to make an environmental statement through the work?

Absolutely. Partly that we used all this refuse to build this space. Given more time and more funding it could have been more refined, but what we came up with was very beautiful and practical. We composted all our own shit. We would have parties and people didn't know that they were sitting on buckets full of shit. It's amazing how

easy it all is to make this stuff. There are so many opportunities now for environmental structures; it doesn't have to be a sacrifice, it can just be a really exciting opportunity. The social fabric that was activated in order to produce the work was really critical to the space. Our gardener solicited all these school children and other volunteers to start growing plants in their homes.

Did any governmental body they take note of what you were doing?

We were supported by the mayor's office at the time. We had a lot of attention in that way.

Off the coast of British Columbia there are secret floating communities that are really incredible, that are just in the shadows of small islands, so that they're not really supposed to be there, everybody knows they're there, but nobody cares.

I think it was these new elements, where you're bringing the community together and sourcing it as a crowd, that were more unique. And bringing it to New York. And having it travel around. We would have kids come and be able to try all of these vegetables they'd never seen. Kale and chard. They were able to handle worms. To feel how much heat is generated by a compost, which is kind of radical. You're thinking like, "Wow, this is just not being utilized."

There are so many artists that are working with the waterways. Being able to create a platform for a lot of environmental voices to exchange ideas and talk about it, doing things like using artificial reefs of oysters in order to purify water areas. It's a thing now. We were recently in the concrete plant park in the Bronx, it was so wild to see the photographs of what it had been like before. It had been this massive industrial wasteland, and now you can look in the water and see these giant crabs. There is a beautiful garden space, and all of these birds have moved in. Did you know they have parrots living in the Bronx?

You mentioned that you're now working in British Columbia on something that involves the waterfront of your neighborhood. Can you talk a little bit about that?

I'm doing a number of different small works. In traditional whirling they talk about how you can take energy through your body, through whirling, and it's what educates the traditional form of your hands. So, you're taking this raw, divine energy and you're taking it through your right palm that's open, and then you're spinning to the left, so you're drawing it in through your heart and then putting it back into the world through your left hand, through the palm. Now it's supposed to be transformed so that it can be more readily available to people who need it.

They've been talking about this for a really long time. This theory about whirling predates Rumi, and predates Turkish whirling. It seems to date farther back into Mongolian tribes who are still practicing whirling as a healing form. I was wondering whether you could do that as an environmental thing. Whether you could impact maybe even just one plant, or maybe you could regenerate a space, through whirling.

I've been doing these outdoor meditations in places where I focus on an environmental aspect through whirling, and then document it over time. I'm also thinking about taking the essence of a space and whether you could share that. I've been recently really interested in hydrosols, where you're taking plant cellular matter and you're infusing it into a water or liquid. It's similar to an essential oil, but it's water based.

So I'm thinking about taking all of these disparate elements, whether it's the greens from the trees, and aromatic seaweeds, and herbs of a specific space, and moss, and earth, and then putting it into a siphon that would create a hydrosol. Then you'd be creating what I've just been lovingly referring to as stove tops, which would be these brass totem stacked sculptures that would have a recessed area that would be able to hold the hydrosols. It would essentially act as a diffuser. It would be activated by your wood stove—which you could still do on your stove in your apartment in New York—but it would be essentially designed for a wood stove, which everybody has where I am right now on the Sunshine Coast. This idea that you could sit and be in that space, at least aromatically.

You mentioned a project that you're working on where you put a full-circle of cameras in the water.

Yeah, 65 cameras. I spend most of my time writing grants right now to get funding for this, because this will be a more expensive version [of an earlier project]. Our original circle uses disposable tourist cameras, which are not really disposable, and we just keep adding more film into them, but they're definitely not waterproof. For the water one, I think we may start with a semi-circle while we work it out.

The idea is that we would sink or float a circle of cameras, and then we would drop objects in the center of it and then capture it as still photos, which we would then animate into a film. You'd get to see the articulation of the movement of the object moving through water. All the bubbles. All the things that you can't see really with your eye. So you can't get a sense of it to remember. My dream is to connect with more isolated communities and be able to see what they would imagine doing with the rig. The new rig will essentially be waterproof, but it doesn't mean it has to be in the water. You can kind of do anything.



This preoccupation with time manifests in a variety of methods and media. Sometimes it is through installation videos, which I create using a custom ring of 65 cameras to simultaneously photograph my subject, whether it is a gas explosion, a dervish in the round or objects frozen in free fall from the forest canopy. The resulting images are compiled to create a stop-motion animation that strives to apprehend the fullness of change in each still moment.

You just spoke a bit about grant writing. I think it's probably something that every artist struggles with.

And it's not covered in any undergrad program that I know of. At Columbia we have this amazing program about commercial practices with Jackie Battenfield. That was life changing. But the fact that there isn't mandatory grant writing as an artist class? I enjoy the process of grant writing. It allows me to really think about my practice in a very different way, and have to write it all out so that it's clearly legible. Sometimes you see some of the holes in your own theories and therefore you have to evolve it further in order to really make it into a really good concept, which I think is essential.

And if it's not a natural thing for you, if it's not something you really enjoy, seek out somebody who does enjoy

it. Try to make a collaboration with them; even if it's a paid collaboration. It's so worth it. This is also true of your artist statement. Your artist statement should be something that you are extremely proud of. It's so essential to how the world sees you. Seek help. I'm a huge fan of institutions because they often have places where you can go and find help, and where they'll pair professional writers and professional artists together.

In a lot of mixed university settings, they'll allow the artist students to have kind of an artistic out as a project, so you don't have to write that massive term paper. You can make a painting about it instead. You end up missing all those opportunities to really force yourself to get better at writing.

So many artists work in isolation, maybe because that's part of their process, and they end up needing that to create.

That's really hard. Working in isolation is fine, but you can't be a naïve artist anymore. It's everywhere. To me, that's something of the past. To be creating work and to have other people creating the same work is fine, as long as you are in conversation with them. And knowingly. So it's like, being able to open yourself up and to work with the community and have those other eyes and input into your own practice. And being honest about that.



My installation *Pavilion To Perpetual Motion*, featured a round tent structure, bound with moving blankets and traditional fabrics, pierced by a tilted bundle of tinted fluorescent tubes. At the center of the space was a plastic cup of pomegranate juice, floating and spinning slowly above a mirrored plinth, while a soft looping soundtrack recalled an orchestra warming up.

That was one of the really wonderful things about Columbia as well—the different forms that some of the artists and teachers would bring to critiques. Where the artist, the maker, doesn't actually speak about the work, just the people in the space talk about their impressions of it really openly—just any kind of association that they have— and to give them that input. Then it's only later that the artist talks about what they were intending with the work. People keep it uplifting, you know, not like a heavy criticism. Until the artist is ready for that. But there are so many different formats; you can really just learn from it.

What would you have found useful to know as a younger version of yourself?

The lofty idea of being a pure artist and making work that has no relationship to the market is a beautiful but unrealistic concept. Now I think more about the skills that I learned. Whether it's being excellent at printmaking, or knowing how to make the perfect painting. Information that you can actually give to somebody else. I'm such a generalist. I think that's one of my faults. I really don't work in a specific medium. I think more about the artwork, and then what medium would work best for that. So whether it's a mix of animation and performance, and all of these little parts that come together in a more sensory installation, that's usually how I work. It's actually going back and relying more on those kind of classical skills, that I'm so grateful I learned along the way, and that helps me sustain my practice.

Mira Hunter recommends:

Experiment with sleeplessness, strange and new things are often found in liminal states of consciousness.

Organize and backup your digital and other art documentation. Computers fail and it can be devastating to lose precious work.

Get good at grant writing or hire someone who is.

Don't limit your practice to your own specific skill set. Seek out collaboration, pay, or barter with an expert. I may not be the best printmaker, but I make excellent cheesecake.

Always bring something or somewhere to record your ideas. Capitalize on drifting time, the moments when your mind wanders on the subway or you get lost in your headphones or in a forest. I always seem to have the most precious ideas when I am unoccupied and in transit.

Name

Mira Hunter

Vocation

Artist

