

Mind & Heart

ART AS MEDITATION

STORY AND ARTWORK
BY
JOY DENEEN

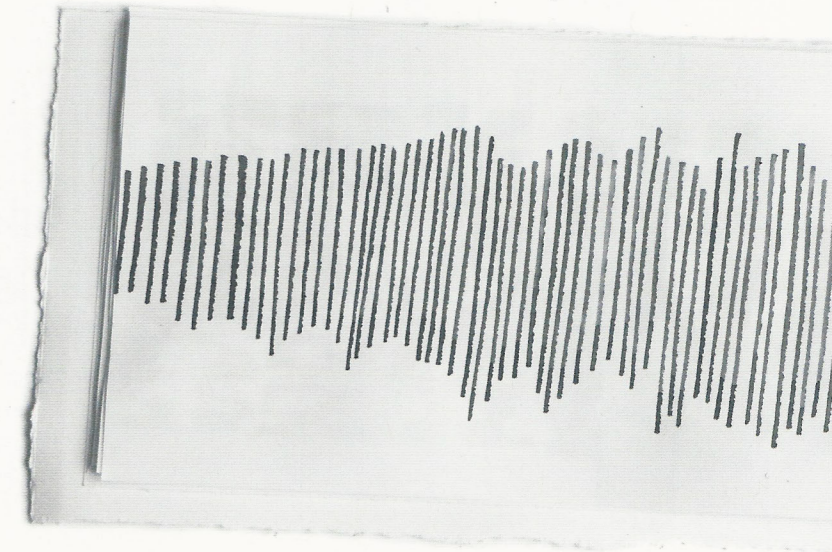
MY MOM TELLS ME THAT I started making marks as soon as I was able to hold a crayon in my hands. She says that sweat would often form on my brow, from drawing so furiously. From hours of colouring and painting as a child, creating clay sculptures as a teenager, doing theatre in college, exploring makeup artistry in my twenties and studying calligraphy in my thirties, the desire to create has remained strong for nearly four decades.

And just as art has been a constant in my life, so has anxiety. Whether it is racing through my brain, inciting unexplained moments of panic or simply sitting with its full weight on my chest, my anxiety has always been present. When I first began studying calligraphy, I felt a new sense of calm that came from dipping pen into ink. I remember wondering what would happen if researchers were to hook artists up to heart rate monitors. Would they discover that moment when the heart rate begins to slow, as the artist melts into a creative flow? While it is profoundly difficult to quiet my thoughts and steady my heart, creating art has been one of the few avenues that has brought me close.

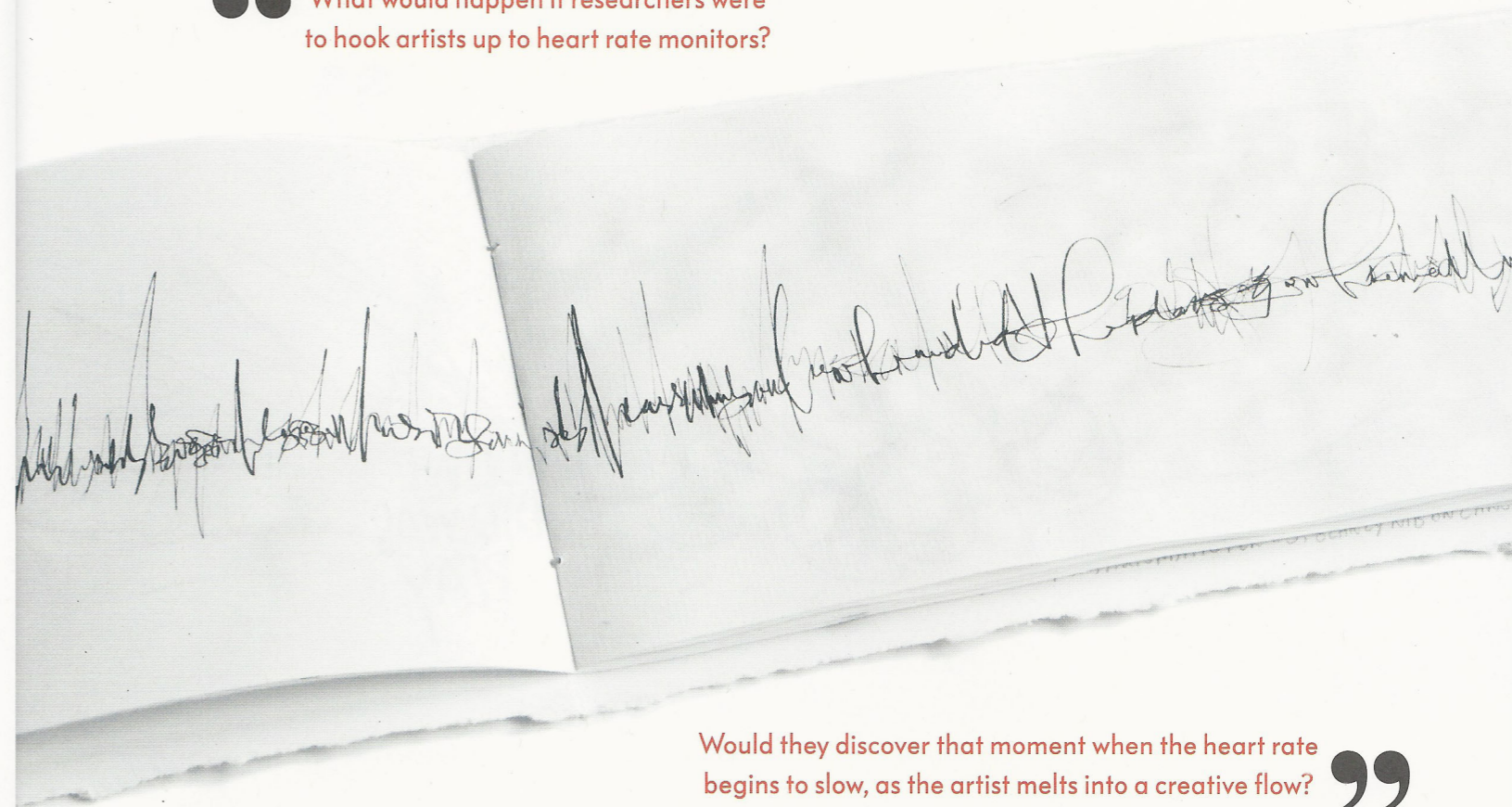


In 2017, I had the pleasure of meeting British calligrapher Ewan Clayton at a symposium in Japan. I was intrigued by both his work and joyful spirit. Ewan lived as a Benedictine monk for four years and went on to become an author, professor and certified somatic coach. In 1995, he wrote “The Calligraphy of the Heart,” an essay that “introduced calligraphy as a meditative process and a way of deepening one’s own embodiment,” and he was going to teach a five-day course on this very topic at the 2018 international calligraphy conference. There were other classes that I thought might have more “practical” impact on my calligraphy business, but I ultimately opted to follow my intuition.

Months later, I arrived at the conference feeling fragile and completely worn down from work. Ewan began the class by saying “we are going to begin gently,” which just about brought me to tears. It was exactly what I needed. We began by simply writing any text in any script of our choosing as a warm-up. One of the first guided exercises

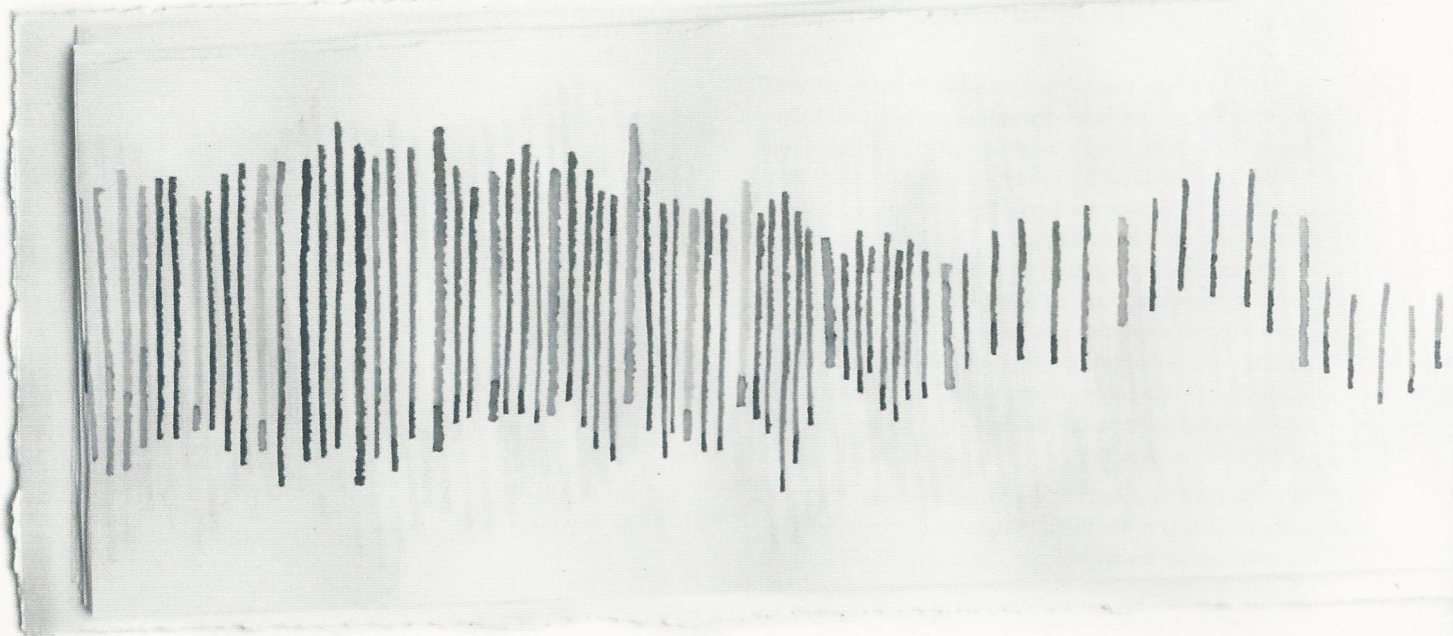


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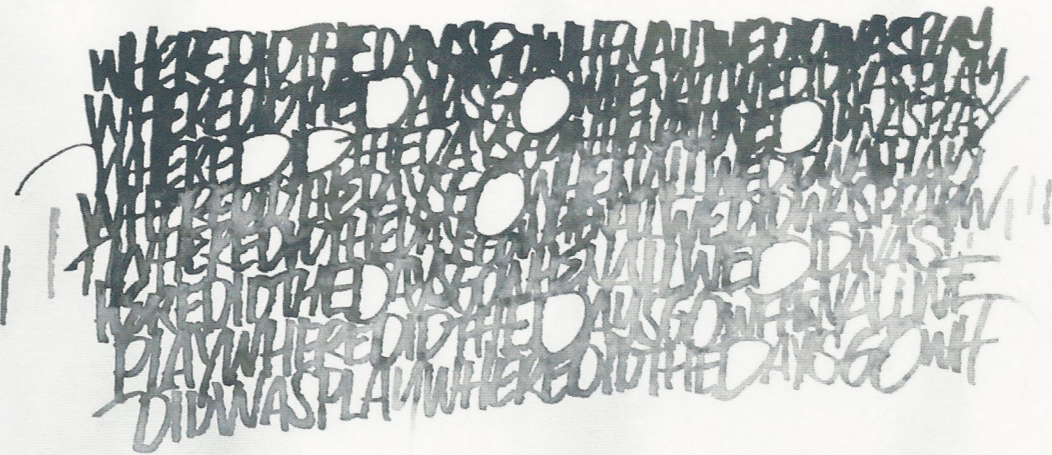


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was to make a connection between lines on the page and ourselves. We made thick vertical strokes on the page, using a wide broad-edged pen. We focused on making contact with the paper and feeling all of the tiny vibrations as the pen moved down the paper, vibrating into our thumb and fingers. We were free to select our own tools for the week, so I chose one of my folded ruling pens, a non-traditional tool that I don't use for wedding work. Ewan encouraged each of us to consider what we wanted to do with our calligraphy and how we wanted to bring ourselves into our work. Each day we went outside for Shintaido, where we stretched and moved our bodies before returning to the classroom to explore the expanse of the page and the space between marks. For Ewan, Shintaido exercises “help me write in a relaxed way and with a sense of the ink pouring out of the whole of me and not just my pen!”

He spoke to us of the Greek concept of soma, where there is no division between the body and mind. “A somatic view of writing is one where every gesture of the writer is potentially carrying the freight of an entire bodily presence,” Ewan explained. “We bring to that action not simply ideas about letter shapes, but a sense of weight and stability and time, of connections to our moods, our experience of language, our relationships and the whole multi-layered ease or dis-ease we experience as embodied persons.” I was particularly intrigued by the idea that switching tools or exploring new mediums could create a “somatic opening,” allowing for change to manifest in one's practice.

As someone who frequently feels discomfort, I asked Ewan how one might address intrusive thoughts. “I try to

let them flow past like clouds in the sky,” he says. “They are there for a moment and then they are gone. The thing is not to get caught up in them; just gently come back to being present in whatever way you do that.” And what about that critical inner voice and imposter syndrome that so many artists feel? Ewan has found that, for him, the best method is a somatic approach: “It is not simply a voice in my head but in my psychobiology. Some work with a partner, where, in the face of my triggers, I can practice coming back into a relaxed and dignified experience of myself is the most helpful kind of work for me. That critical voice is part of me and I am grateful for the many ways it has got me where I am, but I say gently to it: Right now I think you can step down, take a well-earned rest. I am strong enough to take this forward myself now.”

As part of my personal journey for the week, I decided to work with words by songwriter Paolo Nutini: “Where did the days go, when all we did was play?” These words harken back to a time long ago, before my anxiety and critical voice had developed. I took exercises from the class and reworked them into a rectangular book format, playing with ideas of texture and sequence. As I sit and reflect on ways to create a more mindful daily art practice, I consider the new tools I have gained and wonder, is meditation simply a tool? Or can meditation also be a valuable product of the creative process, beyond the piece of art itself? Or could it be both for me and perhaps more? All I know for now is that it is an exploration that I would very much like to continue. 

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