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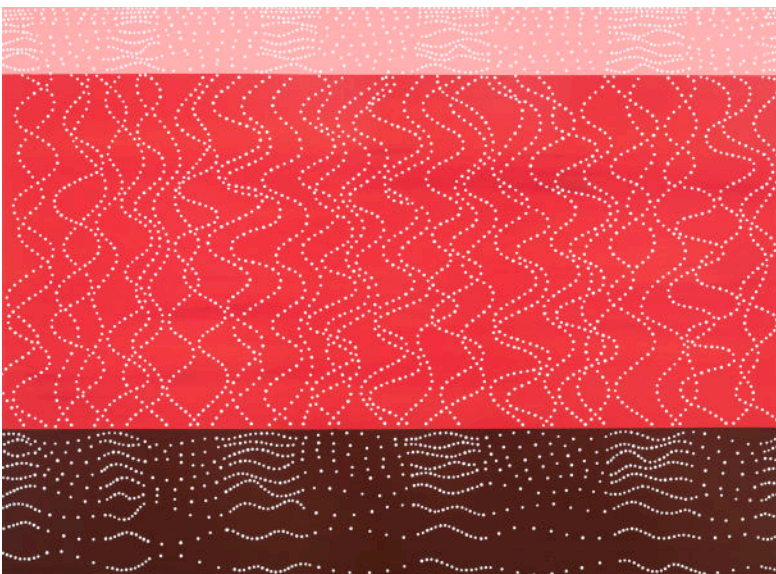
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Above: Ann Cecil-Sterman, a New York-based, Australian-born specialist in acupuncture, has developed a deep understanding of an ancient Chinese method of analyzing the information offered by multilayered readings of the human pulse. She has created a mode of abstract painting that gives visible form to her findings. On the right: A detail of one of her paintings. Photos by Edward M. Gómez

Below: Ann Cecil-Sterman, "Divergent Pulse," 2015, oil on linen, 30 x 40 inches (76.2 x 101.6 centimeters). Photo courtesy of the artist



ANN CECIL-STERMAN'S PAINTINGS: TAKING THE PULSE OF PSYCHIC CURRENTS IN VISIBLE, ABSTRACT FORM

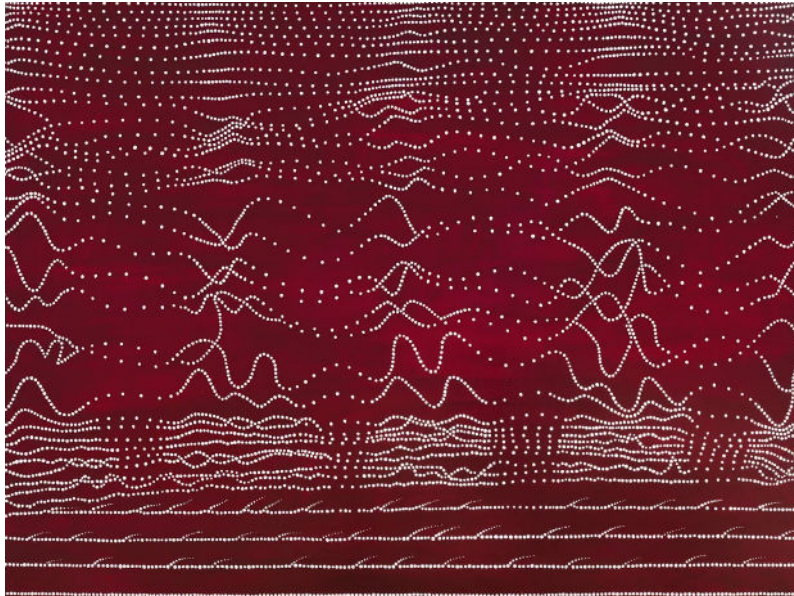
OUT OF HER EXPERIENCE IN ACUPUNCTURE AND AN ANCIENT HEALING TECHNIQUE, AN ARTIST HAS EMERGED

by Edward M. Gómez

NEW YORK – In a nondescript, old office building in downtown Manhattan that years ago was renovated to become a somewhat more contemporary-feeling building, Ann Cecil-Sterman keeps a modest, comfortable, unfussy, uncluttered workspace.

There is nothing bright or flashy about its appearance or décor; its ambiance is that of an unexpectedly soothing, tranquil oasis in a normally very noisy city that, nowadays, looks and feels especially chaotic, dilapidated, and dispiriting. New York's antiquated subway system is filthy, run down, and dangerous; even more than usual, this metropolis has become marked by dramatic income disparities that have made it a playground for those with plenty of money in their pockets and a place of constant struggle for survival for those who don't. And whether they're rich, not-so-loaded, or poor, all New Yorkers took a wallop from the coronavirus pandemic, which left an already stressed-out population feeling downright weary.

Born and brought up in Australia, Cecil-Sterman has lived and worked in the United States for many years. In New York, she studied what is known as advanced acupuncture and classical Chinese medicine with Dr. Jeffrey Yuen, a well-known specialist and educator in these fields who is also a Daoist priest; unlike so-called



Ann Cecil-Sterman, "Earth Pulse," 2014, oil on linen, 30 x 40 inches (76.2 x 101.6 centimeters). Photo courtesy of the artist

modern acupuncture, which focuses on 12 of the human body's "channels," through which "qi" (life energy or the life force) flows through the human body, advanced acupuncture addresses all 68 channels whose study and use date back many centuries. Cecil-Sterman has written the books *The Art of Pulse Diagnosis* and *Advanced Acupuncture, A Clinic Manual*, which have become widely consulted reference works.

In her current practice, Cecil-Sterman performs acupuncture on her patients, who see her for help with stress, physical pains, and other concerns. She also performs a kind of reading of the human pulse that goes beyond the routine checking of a patient's heartbeat to probe deep into his or her psyche. Also associated with ancient Chinese medical techniques, this manner of pulse-reading involves pinching a person's wrist with increasing amounts of pressure and then interpreting the information his or her body reveals through its pulse for clues to a patient's emotional-psyche state.

In turn, a practitioner of this kind of deep pulse-reading pulls together what a patient tells her about his or her mental, emotional, and physical condition with what she can discern about that person's status, taking into consideration such factors as his or her diet; alcohol consumption or smoking; exercise and movement; personal worldview or outlook; work-related, family, intimate-relationship, or other pressures; and general medical history.

The goal: to arrive at a holistic understanding of patients' overall physical-mental-psyche states in order to better figure out what ails them and how to address such conditions. Cecil-Sterman said, "When you take a pulse, you're not just thinking about someone's physiology; you're also looking at how a person approaches their life, how they connect with the world — you're looking at the psychic and psychological dimensions of a patient's life, too."

"Classical or traditional Chinese medicine takes a different approach than that of modern, Western medicine," with its arsenal of high-tech diagnostic and treatment machinery and powerful drugs, Cecil-Sterman explained. But rather than regarding the techniques in which she specializes as competing with those of another kind of medical practice, ideally, she said, she prefers to see them as complementing it.

Cecil-Sterman told me, "Every year, at the workshops and talks I present in several different countries, many of the most enthusiastic participants are Western-

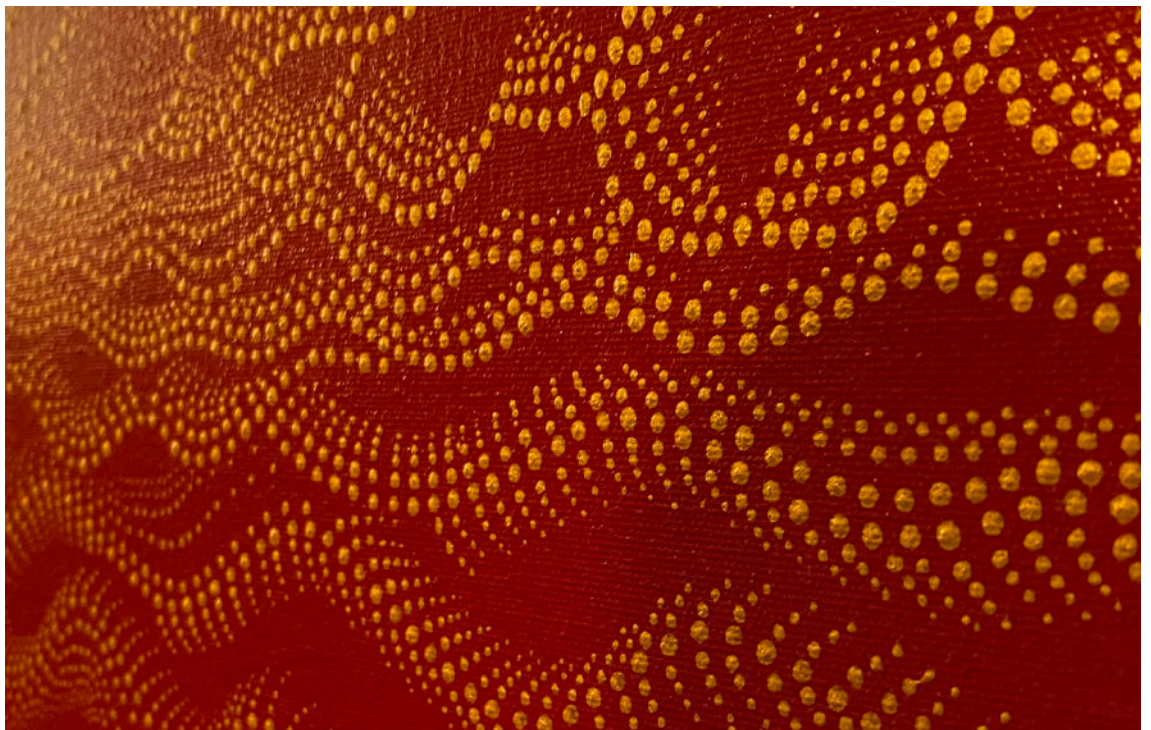
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trained doctors, including many specialists in different fields, who are eager to learn about techniques that can expand and deepen their practices in small clinics or large hospitals.” Such students, she said, are interested in going beyond their bio-chemical, bio-mechanical understanding of the human body, which, in modern Western medicine “is reduced to what you can measure in a lab, which yields the parameters based on which you can make decisions; the spirituality of a patient is completely ignored.”

I had been introduced to Cecil-Sterman by Wendy Snyder, the New York-based founder and director of the Sam Glankoff Collection, an archive that documents and promotes the legacy of the artist for which it is named. Glankoff (1894-1982) was a reclusive artist who made woodcuts, drew comics, and, during the post-World War II heyday of abstract-expressionist art, developed an original, genre-blending “print-painting” technique to create large-scale abstract paintings on handmade Japanese paper. “I think you’ll find Ann’s paintings to be very interesting,” Snyder advised, “especially because they relate to **brujournal**’s ongoing interest in the radical nature of abstract art and, more specifically, to the theme of art that examines or is related to nature’s forces.” After all, the human body in all its complexity is as much a part of nature as any kitty cat, wild boar, or eye-catching landscape and as much a subject for examination by art and artists as it is a focus for study by scientists and doctors.

Detail of the surface of one of Ann Cecil-Sterman’s paintings showing the artist’s dot patterns. Photo by Edward M. Gómez



Cecil-Sterman, who is also a musician – for many years she has served as a substitute flute player for the composer Philip Glass’s ensemble, of which her husband, a saxophonist, is a full-time member – began making paintings a few years ago. In doing so, she aimed to give visible, expressive form to the kind of intangible information she had long been gathering through her pulse-reading practice with her patients. “It seemed like a very natural step to take,” she recalled.

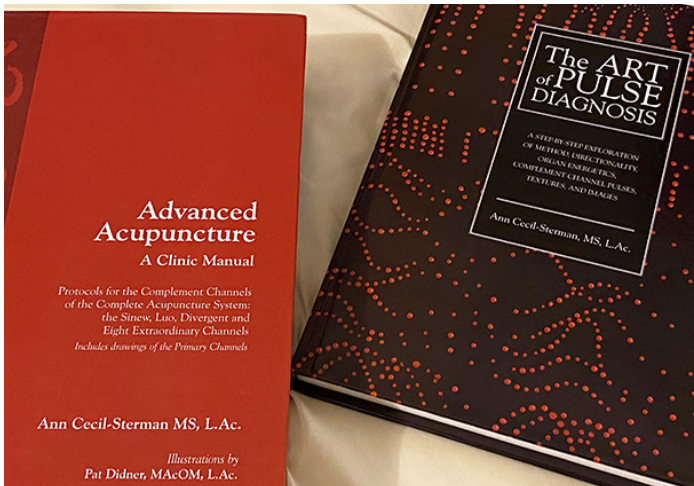
With their distinct bands of color and differently shaped, flowing patterns of dashes, dots, and lines, her compositions feel at once like classic explorations of the expressive power of abstract art and, to some degree, like the printouts of the results of such high-tech medical tests as electrocardiograms.

Like such visual records of the body’s internal activity and also like the work of communications designers, Cecil-Sterman’s art gives visible form to qualitative and quantitative data, albeit to information gathered, literally, in a hands-on manner, through touch, not by computer-controlled machines. She acknowledges that the pattern-making using dots that figures prominently in her compositions alludes to and is derived from the ancient Aboriginal art of her native Australia. She has also noted that, as her body of work has evolved, she has come to appreciate the healing character of her art. Other observers, like Snyder, have recognized it, too.



Above: Ann Cecil-Sterman, "Slippery Pulse," 2014, oil on linen, 60 x 48 inches (154.2 x 122 centimeters). Photo courtesy of the artist

Below: Two of Ann Cecil-Sterman's best-known books



With their arabesques and waves of dots, and, in some compositions, their neatly blocked-off color passages, Cecil-Sterman's paintings map pulse patterns, more broadly speaking, at different levels of the human spirit. She explained that she uses lighter or darker colors to express what she senses, in a metaphorical way, as lighter or darker (or deeper) aspects of this kind of pulse reading, with, say, darker shades used to represent currents coursing deep in a patient's psyche.

In some of her compositions, featuring wide, horizontal bands of color, the dot patterning in a topmost band may be used to represent a person's straightforwardly discernible heartbeat. A middle band of color may represent the rhythms of such a patient's emotional state, while the patterning that appears in a lower strip of color may refer to some of the bedrock fears, assumptions, attitudes, or other driving influences or forces that guide a particular individual's thinking, behavior, and progress through life.

Cecil-Sterman showed Snyder and myself a photograph of one of her paintings and explained that the obviously interrupted flow of its dot patterns had a special meaning. She said, "This picture represents an intermittent pulse. If there's pressure on the kidneys — that is, in a particular patient, if his or her destiny is being resisted — then when you dig down deep in that person's pulse, you may detect a sense of hesitancy in someone who is not fully embodying his or her life." Another painting depicted a gap between two sections of flowing-dot lines. "That represents the time — or space — between two beats of the heart," she explained.

Thinking big and broadly about her art, Cecil-Sterman has written that her paintings may be seen as representing "the rhythm of humanity." As subjects for works of art go, that's a grand one, to be sure. But, as the artist sees it, her big theme derives naturally from the specificity of reading particular patients' pulses one by one. In her art, as in the ongoing story of the human comedy, she has observed, "the *qi* flows, blood flows, rhythm flows, life flows, destiny is realized, and healing emerges."

Resources

Ann Cecil-Sterman's website:
<https://anncecilsterman.com/>

Ann Cecil-Sterman's books are available for purchase from the websites of various online retailers.

