

Artist's film captures images of meditation

By Caroline Abels
Post-Gazette Cultural Arts Writer

What do you see when you meditate? That personal question is one that Carolyn Speranza is asking in a public way.

Speranza, a cross-disciplinary artist best known for her public art and digital works, is making a digital video film that illustrates in abstract ways the images people see when they meditate. Her process for making the film includes listening to people's reactions to traditional meditation and meditative experiences.

Since July, Speranza has gathered members of the public for occasional "salons" at Pittsburgh Filmmakers. Each salon includes a discussion about a type of meditation and a brief practice of it, plus audience feedback.

Speranza plans to incorporate people's thoughts and ideas into her film, "Sight of Stillness." The film is intended to bridge the fields of neuroscience, art and spirituality by picking up where traditional representations of meditation leave off.

"I could make a documentary on the effects of meditation on health or on the brain," Speranza said. "But 'Nova' does that really well. What I'm after is the experience itself."

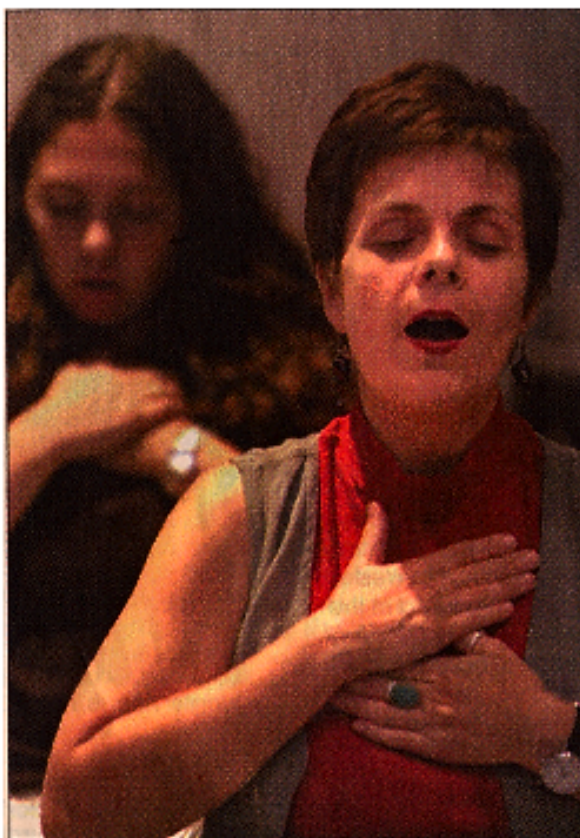
A few weeks ago, 20 people attended a salon hosted by Kevin Henry, a local meditation teacher. Henry first reviewed the seven traditional "chakras," which, according to Vedic and East Asian cultures, are distinct places in the body where energy is stored and released. Then he led the group in seven different chants designed to tap the energy in each chakra.

As the group focused their attention on the crown of their head — the seventh chakra — they chanted "mmmmmm" and were then asked what came to mind when they did so.

Mickey and Joyce Arnowitz said they imagined rays of sunshine coming through their head and wind blowing on a mountain. Philomena O'Dea said she remembered her grandmother humming as she made bread in a cottage in Ireland.

Cheryl Casteen said she felt a sensation similar to the one she gets when eating spicy Japanese wasabi sauce — a comment that sparked much laughter in the group.

"Put that in your film!" Henry joked to Speranza.



Annie O'Neil/Post-Gazette

There are many different schools of meditation — loosely defined as the act of keeping one's attention focused on the present moment by quieting internal dialogue in the mind. To reflect the variety of traditions in her film, Speranza is using a variety of teachers to lead her salons.

Kundalini yoga practitioner Kilolo Luckett led a salon in July on kundalini breathing, and artist and educator Maritza Mosquera discussed "deep listening." On Sept. 19, musicians David Pohl and Eric Mason and yoga teacher Anu Kumar discussed the relationship between music and the meditative mind.

During his chakra salon, Henry called meditation "an immensely brave act."

"To sit down, and sit still, throws the doors open, and every emotion comes home," he said. "I think that's why it's not a popular thing."

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Carolyn Speranza, who is making the movie "Sight of Stillness," takes part in a meditation "salon" at Pittsburgh Filmmakers in Oakland.



Annie O'Neill/Post-Gazette

Julianne Faria stretches out during a meditation exercise at Pittsburgh Filmmakers in Oakland. Carolyn Speranza is doing a digital video project on meditation called "Sight of Stillness."

Artist captures images of meditation

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Speranza hopes the salons will make meditation less daunting to people and encourage the public to explore a new way of living.

"I'm creating [with each salon] an opportunity for people to have a focused meeting that has transformative power to it," she said. "It's ultimately about helping people."

Speranza knows firsthand how meditation can help. At 5 years of age, she began suffering from severe eczema, allergies and hypo-

glycemia. No treatment worked until, at age 34, she met a local chiropractor who took the stress out of her nervous system through a series of treatments. He also suggested meditation.

Speranza now meditates daily. She also practices kundalini yoga.

Her "Sight of Stillness" project was made possible by a \$40,000 grant from the Heinz Endowments' Creative Heights Residency program, which fosters the creation of new art by funding joint projects between individual artists and estab-

lished arts organizations. Speranza's Creative Heights partner is Pittsburgh Filmmakers.

"Sight of Stillness" salons will take place through the fall, followed by a symposium at the Carnegie Science Center and a screening of the full-length film early next year. For more information, call Pittsburgh Filmmakers at 412-681-5449 or go to www.speranza.net/stillness.

Caroline Abels can be reached at cabels@post-gazette.com or 412-263-2614.



Caroline Speranza, local filmmaker, has focused her art on health and wellness issues.

Sight Specific

A NEW FILM ON MEDITATION EXPLORES THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE MIND AND BODY

Writer: SHARMILA VENKATASUBBAN

SHAR@STEELCITYMEDIA.COM

Photographer: HEATHER MULL

Caroline Speranza has lived with health problems for as long as she can remember. Eczema, winter depression, obesity, allergies — the 39-year-old filmmaker spent most of her life in doctor's offices, on diets, applying cortisone to her body; basically finding ways to treat her condition by easing her symptoms. Nothing worked; by age 17, she weighed over 170 lbs., and her red, itchy skin blotches had spread from isolated patches on arms to her chest, head and face.

"Then, when I was 24, I fell in love with a man," Speranza says. "And he didn't care about any of that. I felt unconditionally loved. And I began losing weight. I didn't change my diet or exercise practices drastically, but I dropped pounds."

So a light bulb switched on in her head: For the first time, Speranza made a connection between the mind and body, specifically how the state of one directly affects the other. And that was 15 years ago, before the phrase "mind-body" had even entered popular consciousness.

Still, she continued to grapple with allergies and eczema. It wasn't until the last five years that, with the guidance of a chiropractor, she adopted dietary, exercise and meditative practices, which helped her move past what she considered an inherent part of her existence — living with pain — and actually feel healthy.

In her upcoming film, *Sight of Stillness*, she tries to express the essence of her experience through the words of others who describe what it's like, for them, to meditate. The screening will take place during a two-day symposium (at both the Carnegie Science Center and Pittsburgh Filmmakers) of the same name that will include yoga

instruction, lectures by health and science experts, and opportunities to meditate. Funded by a \$40,000 Creative Heights Heinz Endowment grant, *Stillness* is Speranza's first attempt at narrative filmmaking; until now, she was primarily known as a video installation artist.

Speranza has been a resident artist at Pittsburgh Filmmakers since 2000, when she first proposed the project. Before then she held a research fellowship at Carnegie Mellon's STUDIO for Creative Inquiry, during which she created two public art installations for First Night — the New Year's Eve art event held Downtown.

"When I was 24, I fell in love with a man. I felt unconditionally loved. And I began losing weight. I didn't change my diet or exercise practices drastically, but I dropped pounds." — CAROLINE SPERANZA

Stillness is a 25-minute, digital-video film of eight stories from five local people, such as yoga instructor Saeeda Hafiz, about meditation — not instruction, but personal, seemingly lyrical accounts of the experience. She recorded sound files of their monologues, then gave the files to composer Eric Moe, who created original music for the film. The actors who represent the speakers don't work from a script; rather, they try to visually recreate the meditative experience.

"I asked them not to tell how to meditate, but to explain *what happens* when they meditate," Speranza says. "I asked them to share two or three life-altering meditations.

"And they are very personal. In fact, when I gave the files to [composer Moe], he said he couldn't think of anything more personal without it being prurient."

The symposium is designed to attract not just those already familiar with mind-body activity, but also those who might be considered skeptics — those who need proof of the benefits of meditation. Therefore, Speranza scheduled a line-up of health and science professionals who will speak about their work in the field.

For example, Harvard School of Medicine researcher Sat Bir Singh Khalsa has been studying the treatment of insomnia with yoga and medicine. And Brenda Cole, whose work at the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Research Institute studies the effect of religion and spirituality on the lives of HIV-negative and -positive gay men, will share her current findings on new spiritual paradigms for those coping with cancer.

Day two of the symposium will be more experiential. Participants will be given opportunities to sample a yoga class (offered by Strip District-based studio Schoolhouse Yoga) and a meditative experience. Dorit Brauer, who teaches meditation and guided imagery courses at both the Center for Complementary Medicine UPMC and Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield, will lead a guided meditation that is based on her studies of alpha-wave brain level activity induced by the sound of quartz crystal bowls. Local musician and yoga practitioner David Pohl will be performing, and there will be a screening of *Stillness* during the day as well.

These days Speranza is hardly the same person she was in her 20s. She wakes up every morning, practices yoga postures and stretches, and meditates. She's no longer limited by what she perceived to be her lifelong health-induced boundaries.

"This symposium is a culmination of a commitment I made years ago to put my art and the issue of health and wellness together, and to reach the public," she says. "And that's what I've done." ☞

The *Sight of Stillness* symposium will take place from 1-5 p.m. Sat., March 1, at the Carnegie Science Center, and from 3-7 p.m. Sun., March 2, at Pittsburgh Filmmakers — a screening of *Sight of Stillness* will be held in the Melwood Screening Room at 3 p.m. For more information and to register for the symposium call 412-681-5449 or go to www.sightofstillness.info.



editor's NOTE

Health & Fitness caught up with filmmaker Carolyn Speranza about her new film *Sight of Stillness: What Do You See When You Meditate?*

What is your film about?

"Sight of Stillness: What Do You See When You Meditate?" is designed to share the experience of meditation. My intention with this film is to inspire people by putting them, as they sit in the movie theater, directly inside the experience of meditation.

Where and when can you see it?

Right now, the only public screening was at Pittsburgh Filmmakers **March 23, 2003**. That will change though, ~~once I have an~~ effective distribution method.

Tell us about why you chose to do this? And how?

Working with a chiropractor during the summer of 1997, my health began to improve in a way it never had, after 20 years of winter depression and 30 years of eczema and psoriasis. In February 1998 I took a seminar called the Landmark Forum. On that Sunday, we looked at what problem-beyond our daily complaints, that would light a fire under us. What would we want our lives to be about? What I saw for myself is that my life had been about surviving as an artist, and that's all. I then made a commitment to bring a larger than life experience of wellbeing to people, through art, science and digital media. "Sight of Stillness" is the result of making that commitment.

Have you always wanted to be a filmmaker?

Actually, I never wanted to be a filmmaker, and I have fallen in love with filmmaking. In

the past, I have identified myself as an artist making public art, installation and conceptual work. The Heinz Endowments Creative Heights residency at Pittsburgh Filmmakers has transformed me. I am now stepping into being a filmmaker.

Where and what did you study?

I have a BFA from Carnegie Mellon ('85) and a MFA from the Ohio State University ('90). It was at Ohio State, working with Richard Harned, that I began to use neon light, slide projection and make Xerox/computer collages. With digital media, I am mostly self-taught utilizing public art as an opportunity to learn new skills.

What were your challenges, if any? What would you tell people about creating your dream and vision?

When you say your life is about making a difference, the ongoing challenge is being a leader, using the distinctions of leadership. In terms of budget, management and people, "Sight of Stillness," is my largest project to date. Another way of looking at it is, "Stillness" has been my biggest opportunity to make a difference with people. In having something like that at stake with a project of my own conception, it is up to me to exercise the muscle of leadership. This means discipline and practice with speaking in a way people can hear me, keeping the integrity of budget, looking for where communication is absent, and producing what I said, by when I said it.

Why focus on meditation?

Meditation is a vehicle providing direct access to the mind/body inquiry. The brain is made of flesh. It is no different than the heart, lung or liver. We make it special in that it is the seat of the mind, and for some, the soul. Scientists are receiving funding from the National Institute of Health to study the brain during Yoga and Meditation. The results of their study are in the domain of the physical, distinct from the domain of consciousness. Yet people meditate to gain, or perhaps regain consciousness by taking stress off their parasympathetic nervous system.

Can anyone learn to meditate from watching this?

That's a great question as it points to what the film is not. "Sight of Stillness" does not explain how to meditate. It is neither a teaching tape nor a documentary. What the film does is share the meditation experiences of five people. And it does this primarily in their speaking, and through music and cinematic imagery.

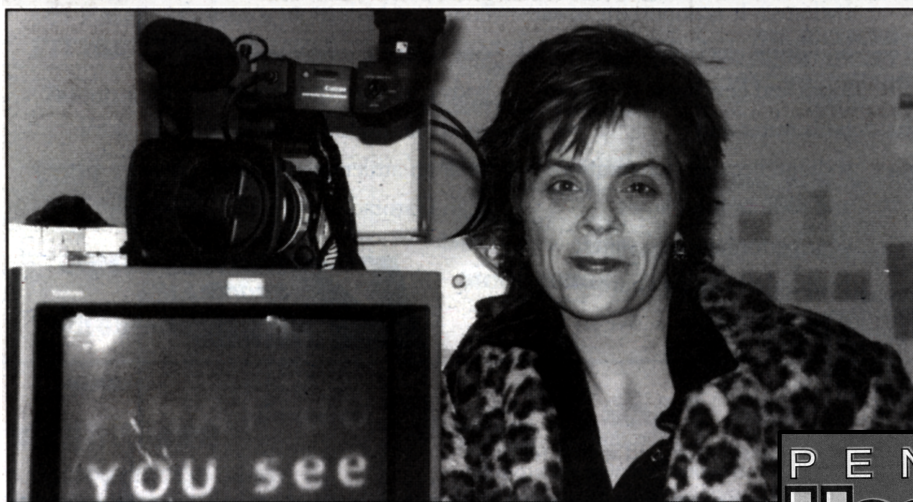
Tell us about your "healthy lifestyle".

My life is made up of practices. These practices include Kundalini Yoga, martial arts, meditation and chiropractic adjustments, weekly. Daily, I practice a combination of yoga and martial arts movement, plus meditation for about a half hour, 45 minutes, total, each morning. I also practice rest and detoxification with sea salt baths. My diet is low in processed food, sugar, alcohol and caffeine. It is high in protein, fruits and vegetables. I drink a ton of water, some herbal tea and espresso, no soda and very little bottled juice. Also, I "graze," eating small protein and fruit snacks, in between meals. All this is to keep my body in balance, a body that was once obese, hypoglycemic and that suffered winter depression yearly.

What are your plans now that it is "finished"?

Create effective distribution for "Sight of Stillness," travel to Tibet, Japan and perhaps India, and to make another film!

Here's the web site for ongoing information about the film www.sightofstillness.info



PENNSYLVANIA
Health & Fitness
MAGAZINE

What Do You See When You *Meditate?*

A conversation with
Carolyn Speranza

by Sven Hosford

Carolyn Speranza is an artist who is fascinated by the power of words. "Words create space in the world for something new to occur."

For most of the last year, she has been putting words to work as an artist in residence at Pittsburgh Filmmakers, working on her project "Sight of Stillness: What do you see when you meditate?"

The project was funded by a grant from the Heinz Endowments' Creative Heights Residency Program, which "supports the creation of new art in the Pittsburgh region by funding creative partnerships between the city's artists and cultural organizations," according to her website. "So much of my project is collaboration," she says in real life. We met at Pittsburgh Filmmakers, which, she assured me, had been nearly miraculous in their support of her project.

Carolyn speaks in a precise way, slightly reminiscent of your eighth grade English teacher, but with the vocabulary of a philosopher and the insight of a psychologist. Her eyes are dark and piercing, yet sparkling with a quiet humor bubbling just beneath the surface. Overall, she exudes an aura of crisp, efficient creativity.

PoL: Tell us about your project.

CS: The project is called "Sight of stillness: What do you see when you meditate?" The purpose is to share the experience of meditation and when the project is completed it will exist in four distinct components. Each component does something that the other ones don't.

First is an artistic digital video film to share the experience of meditation. Second is a short documentary piece being created at the same time, documenting the creation of the artistic piece,

the process – the entire project. Third is an extensive website. The fourth component is a key component: a series of public events – salons and a symposium. What I want to do in this domain is create a public listening for meditation in all its aspects: meditation experience, meditation in the strict sense, the discipline, the practice of meditation. All components share the experience in different ways. The salons and symposium generate a conversation publicly. The salons had different leaders, one was on hatha yoga, one was on meditation and the everyday, one was on meditation and prayer, another one was on the relationship to the creative processes. One that was powerful for me, because I had never done anything like this before, was one on toning and the chakras with Kevin Henry. That was awesome!

PoL: Most people think of meditation as an internal experience and you have made all these salons about externalizing the process of meditation, meditation and yoga, meditation and prayer, meditation and the creative process, meditation and toning.



"Meditation is the vehicle for examining the nature of consciousness."

CS: Yes! And each of the salons have been set up with a practicum, which is set up so that the participants participate; they actually DO something, they do the toning, they do the kundalini breathing, brainstorming or whatever it is. They participate and then there is an opportunity and an invitation to share what their experience is, and that is really really key, because it is in the sharing that the public conversation is generated and it's in the sharing of the spoken word that, in a sense, a space is created out in the world for meditation.

We operate with language. That's what humans do. So to make this an out in the world phenomena, not just an "in the artist's head" phenomena – which is something I'm completely dedicated to – that's how these public events function and serve the project as a whole.

The purpose of the artistic piece is to share the experience. I interview people about their experiences. I ask them, "Can you say that in a way that more directly paints a picture of what's occurring in your internal space?" to get them as closely as possible to the experience. There really is a way to share that makes it directly accessible to others. When I'm interviewing people, that's where I'm coming from.

PoL: What happens to the finished pieces after the final symposium? Will they be seen or shown?

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CS: What I can say to you is that I have aspirations. Nothing is set right now. The purpose of the documentary piece is to enable me to share the project with other organizations and other funding agents beyond Pittsburgh to continue doing my work. I'm an independent artist, so part of my process is seeking collaborators, seeking organizations and seeking funding. So the community outreach department at Pittsburgh Filmmakers is very very good and very talented at making short documentaries about non-profit organizations who are up to something, who are out making a difference in the world.

With the artistic piece, I would love to have it in (film) festivals. I would love to have it distributed. It's not an educational piece, it doesn't teach anything. People will get what they get and hopefully they will be inspired or moved to put some of this in their own life.

PoL: *It's about making the space in the world for meditation.*

CS: Yes, absolutely.

PoL: *What is your background – spiritually, religiously, metaphysically, philosophically – that spurred you to create this project?*

CS: It's more in the domain of health. My earliest memories – when I was five years old – were of having eczema, psoriasis and allergies. I have had a whole lifetime of chronic health issues up until 1997-98. There didn't seem to be anybody – I mean anybody – in traditional western medicine, or homeopathic medicine or using muscle-testing [applied kinesiology] – who could even make a dent. For the most part the feedback I was given was that “well it's chronic so that means you have to put up with it” and I was given some cortisone or told to stay away from wool blankets.

PoL: *They treated the symptoms not the cause.*

CS: Right. But I knew it was my whole being affected by this stuff going on. A friend recommended I go see Cary Simons who is a chiropractor. And I said “Why would I go to see a chiropractor about my skin?” and she said “Well, he can do anything.” And I said “But does he listen?” because I didn't feel listened to. I went to an MD who did an enormous amount of testing of my blood and got at some things that had not been got at before, but...

What opened up for me is not only did I have this stuff, that was kind of obvious, but I also had something that was not obvious to me, but which I had been living with all my life, which was hypoglycemia. So my normal way of living life was my energy would go up, then it would go down, then it would go up, then go down – and that was just the way I did life. Then all of a sudden with the sugar control diet that Cary put me on, my body started to cleanse and my energy level stopped going up and down and up and down, and I had my first winter in 20 years without winter depression. In my life, that's a miracle.

Then Cary said “You might want to check out some yoga.” So I did. Then he said, “You might want to try some meditation.” I knew what meditation was – I understood the concept – but how do you do it? So I went and found a book by Alan Watts. In the book he said you need to focus on something outside your mind. You need to focus on the water going down the stream or music or light or a crack in the sidewalk. So I literally started meditating by doing two things. I lay on my back and focused on a crack in the ceiling and listened to Brian Eno ambient music. And that's how I started meditating! It was not tied to any particular religion.

PoL: *There's no Eno-ism.*

CS: Yeah. So when my energy level started to zoom around, I'd eat protein and meditate, and there was no longer any conversation about depression or something's wrong or anything.

PoL: *So this is a regular practice now?*

CS: There are things that I do that have meditation. I do yoga, I attended the school of Oom Yung Doe [martial arts] for a number of years and did beautiful chi kung meditations. A lot of the movement is a moving meditation. Very powerful stuff. Twice I have

gone out to California to a retreat center with the Self-Realization fellowship, and I do attend their Sunday Sessions. So to be in that group of very strong meditators gives me something. Those are the things I do for myself.

The transformation for me through meditation has been that I have had experiences in meditation that I can point to and say "That was a spiritual experience. I had a spiritual experience." Before that I couldn't say that.

PoL: Did you have any kind of religious upbringing?

CS: No my father was an atheist, a scientist, an engineer and growing up we were exposed to religions. That is the way my parents are, they exposed us to everything but we were told that when we were 18 we could decide what we wanted to do. That's the way my parents brought me up, exposing us to a lot and giving us choices. Informed choices.

PoL: Is that the framework you use to take your work out to the world? "Here's something to consider. Make your own choice."

CS: Very interesting. Cary asked me, basically, "What's your message? What's your agenda?" And it's something really simple like, "Meditation is Good. Explore your consciousness."

My work clearly says, "I'm out to make a difference with people." What I'm doing is having an inquiry. That's different than knowing the answer.

It's like, "decide," you know? Decide – genocide – homicide – "cide" is like death, right? So if I knew what I was going to "decide" in the end, there would be no inquiry or artistic process. Meditation is the vehicle for examining the nature of consciousness. And in some degree thereby enlightenment. So meditation is good, enlightenment is good, and where I come from, I'm very practical, in-your-life about it. It's not ethereal mumbo-jumbo. It's available in my conversation with you or my conversation with the gentlemen who shows up in a salon one day and the next day says to me "Thank you for providing the space to say what I said about my personal experience." For me that is so much an in-your-life phenomena.

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What do you see when you meditate? *continued from 16*

PoL: When you now point to one of those spiritual experiences that you've had in meditation, how has that changed your life? What do you do next?

CS: Prior to taking on the practice of meditation – in taking it on and having it for a period of time – I've had flow experiences and lost definition of myself, especially doing artwork where I've lost my definition of my identity of who I am in space. But within meditation itself, the experience was being connected to the larger universe, or the inter-connect- edness of all things, which as a definition is what works for me the best. And I can say sitting there in my meditation I had a spiritual experience. I couldn't say that before I took on the practice of meditation. I can say I had similar experiences, related experiences.

PoL: So let me ask it another way. You've had these experiences. You can call them spiritual. How has that changed your life?

CS: "How has it changed my life?" [long pause] The result is... [another long pause] Well the result is that I'm in a different space. I'm more conscious.

Having grown up in the context that I grew up in and not attending a religious practice, the way I've been about it is if I have an experience that I can say 'oh that was spiritual' then that's evidence that that's available. Not like somebody told me it was available, but that's evidence that it's available.

PoL: All the major religions talk about faith and how you must have faith no matter what, but at some point in your spiritual development, something else takes over, and that something is experience. When you have actual experiences of the Divine, of the One-Life, you no longer need to depend on faith to carry you. There's something beyond faith.

CS: Yeah. For me – and this is just for me, not necessarily for everyone else – faith is

an in-your-head phenomena, it's not an out-in-the-world phenomenon. It's important to have out-in-the-world phenomena.

Having experiences that I can say "I've had a spiritual experience" transforms where I'm coming from. As an artist, I'm coming from a particular box, a particular paradigm, a particular history, right? It's like the project or the film or the artwork is in front of the curtain, and where I'm coming from is behind the curtain. So obviously these experiences transform what's behind the curtain, transforms the paradigm from which I'm coming.

We can all have a clear vision of from where she is coming when both films premier as part of a two day event. At press time, that is scheduled for late February or early March 2003. Point your browser to www.sightofstillness.org or www.pointoflight.com for details of the events as they become available.