

A Matter of Life and Breath

Yoga at the Westwood Art Forum, May – June 2008

“Yoga is art in motion,” says Hillary Rubin. “Each breath is a brushstroke.”

She was sitting in the lotus position in front of a capacity group of 20 students on the third floor of the Westwood Art Forum, sunlight streaming through the windows behind her. The incessant rumble of rush hour traffic filtered up from the street below, yet a peaceful ambience wrapped the room like a blanket.

“Yoga, like art, is an expression of what is inside us,” she said. “Our poses are alive inside, and when we create them, and hold them, we bring them into being. Our yoga poses are our art and we are artists gently striking the chisel.”

Rubin teaches Anusara yoga, an offshoot of Iyengar yoga known for its gentleness and humor, and she is one of seven instructors who presented a wide range of classes in conjunction with the Los Angeles exhibition of *The Vision and Art of Shinjo Ito*.

Among the others, Vinnie Marino, a very popular New York native with glowing tributes from movie stars on his web site, taught his challenging Vinyasa flow class; Nina Mikkelsen, a third-generation Los Angeles native, brought her highly regarded Hatha yoga class; and Brad Kelmich taught “Symphonic Yoga,” which was set to classical music.

Like the others, Hillary Rubin’s class was adapted to meet the experience levels of all the students, some of whom had been studying for decades and others who were taking their first class.

At the outset, Rubin told her students she was deeply moved by the art exhibit and she began by reading a quotation from Shinjo Ito:

I am not a professional artist. So I'm unsure as to how well my skills can express the Buddha's virtue, compassion, and loving kindness in the images I create. But I do pour my soul into the work, as if offering three prostrations for every cut of the chisel. That may be the only thing that shows in my work.

“It is humbling to think of this man pouring his soul into his work,” Rubin said, “for he had much more skill than he gave himself credit for. We often feel that way about our yoga practices, that we are amateurs. But although we can only work with the skills we have at the moment, we are never cut off from pouring our soul into the yoga.”

Throughout the seven classes, many of the teachers and students made connections between the yoga and the art of Shinjo Ito. “Enlightenment doesn’t come that easily,” Vinnie Marino said. “This artist was a man who endured hardship in his life and you can see it in his work. We too have gone through our own struggles, and I think you can see it in our yoga.”

“I see precision in his art,” said Vytas Baskauskas, a yoga teacher in his 20’s with a growing Los Angeles following. “Yoga asanas are all about precision too. But it takes determination to perfect them,” he said, standing next to one of the Achalanatha images.

Baskauskas credits yoga with helping him quit an addiction to heroin. “There will be times when you want to give up on a yoga asana, or some aspect of your life, and that’s when it helps to listen to the teacher within yourself,” he said.

Many found parallels between a sense of peace communicated through the art and through their yoga practices. “I could feel the energy the moment I walked into the space,” Hillary Rubin said.

Christine, a paralegal in her 30’s said, “This is peaceful art, and you can feel that the people who brought it here are peaceful people. We need to have places like this if we are to encourage the peace within ourselves,” she said.

For Jessica, a UCLA program coordinator in her 20’s, the sacred space of the gallery was so potent it reached outside to the sidewalk. “There is a doorman who stands out there all day, and I would greet him as I walked by,” she said. “That’s what got me to come in the first time. It’s so tranquil and peaceful in here that I came back again and again. That vibe was apparent during the class. I didn’t feel the L.A. ego in here like I do in yoga studios,” she said.

Some felt the yoga and art were a powerful combination that could improve physical health. Erica Sloan, 33, an Australia native, is a UCLA cancer researcher studying psychoneuroimmunology, “a fancy word meaning, how stress is translated through the brain and affects the body,”

Science is learning that “many of the things we thought were unchanging about the brain, the body, and the way it all works in relation to stress are surprisingly fluid,” she said.

“Over time, I have realized the positive effects of yoga on my own health. There must be some biological reasons. When I am stressed and I go to an art gallery, it calms me down,” she said. “Doing yoga here in this sacred space, it felt like the benefits were multiplied,” she noted.

Nina Mikkelsen demonstrated one of the final poses in her class by lying on her side, her head supported with her hand, and raising her top leg. She was at the far end of the room duplicating the pose of Shinjo Ito's Parinirvana image directly behind her. Several students noticed the striking moment, although Mikkelsen did not. "It just happened," she said. "It was a moving class, I felt honored to be here."

"Coming up against the difficulties of life, or of making art, or of perfecting our yoga postures, we revisit our ability to be compassionate, loving, and kind," Hillary Rubin said. "Those expressions on behalf of ourselves, or others, are beautiful," she said. "You can feel the love Shinjo Ito poured into his art, and we endeavor to pour love into our yoga—and so they come together into one big celebration."

(Leslie Lindeman)