

Unu Spiro: One Breath Meditation Paintings by Filiz Emma Soyak

Born in 1979 in Belgium to a Turkish father and a Swedish mother, Filiz Emma Soyak knew by the age of five that visual art was her calling and way of expression. Her heritage, travels and wanderlust provide continuous inspiration and perspective. Motherhood changed her world and signified a major shift in her work to a more mindful practice and a conscious approach. More than ever now she reflects awareness about living in the present.

Unu Spiro translates to 'one breath' in Esperanto, a language designed to unite, and one in which everything is rooted in the present.

I began my one breath paintings as a meditative practice to appreciate the present moment. I became a mother in 2016 to a brilliant soul. My heart expanded, my life changed, and I changed. But as I transitioned into motherhood, I felt more chaos than clarity as the days and nights blurred by with dizzying speed. I observed myself handling everything with less grace and more discomfort than I had anticipated. Intuition had always been my guide, but I couldn't hear my own thoughts clearly and I lost faith in my instincts. Everything I knew as myself was no more. While my new life demanded me to be more present, I felt my mind manically jumping to the past and worrying about the future. My breath did not come easily. My body didn't seem to belong to me anymore, and neither did my time. I felt detached from the person I was before. Who was this person? Where was the calm, curious, observant, positive, driven, creative being I remembered as myself? I felt like a shell of my former self.

I knew something had to change.

For all of my life, making art has been my way of processing and making sense of life experiences. It is my identity. It is my language. It has also been a practice in mindfulness. But in my new role, I couldn't work the way I was used to. There were limitations on my time and energy, and I didn't feel inspired when I was not able to connect to my intuition.

I had started doing Yoga and meditation in college twenty years earlier. But since having a baby, I hadn't figured out a way to do much of anything for myself, let alone keep up a spiritual practice. I knew from my experience that it would help.

Surely I could find ten minutes!

I opened up an old bottle of black ink. There was still some left. I didn't know what I was going to do, but it wasn't about the product; it was about the process.

So, I committed to meditating every day. I noticed a change immediately. Meditation helped me to slow down, to breathe, and to hear my inner voice again. After a few weeks, my intuition told me something I had known all along. The artist in me was still there, and I had to find a way to paint again. But I had to simplify and minimize everything – my creative process, the materials, the scale, the colors, and form.

One June morning in 2017, while my daughter napped, I sat in my attic studio with a sketchbook opened to a blank page. I picked up a handmade calligraphy brush I had owned for decades but never used. I filled a ceramic bowl with water – one that I had made in Japan when I was 12. I opened up an old bottle of black ink. There was still some left. I didn't know what I was going to do, but it wasn't about the product it was about the process. I squeezed a dropper full of ink into the water. Watching it drip, then move and morph slowly within the water was mesmerizing. I took a deep breath and raised my brush. Exhaling, I dipped it into the bowl. Inhaling again I pressed the brush onto the paper, and as I exhaled I moved the brush to make a mark. I felt calmer. With each breath, I painted another stroke. It was slow, methodical, and it felt good. So I did it again and again.

Over time, stories of motherhood unfolded and reflected their lessons back to me in the form of abstract black marks on paper. My creative practice had become my mindfulness practice. My paintings were my meditations, my teachings. My breath had carved out a path for me to center and process my life. I had arrived at Unu Spiro, one breath paintings, and found stillness, peace, and gratitude for my new self and the present.

Art essay by FILIZ EMMA SOYAK