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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF Joyce A. Bryerton for the Master of Fine Arts in Painting presented October 4, 1991.

Title: Reciprocating Transformations.

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Primus St. John

The paintings in this thesis project began with a study of various representational images, both personal and symbolic. It included the exploration of assorted media and different styles of execution in a search for imagery to represent the scope of my life experience. This

search involved a method of working that excluded preconcieved images. The original images evolved into an abstract state which alludes directly to the figurative and organic nature of the earlier work.

RECIPROCATING TRANSFORMATIONS

by

JOYCE A. BRYERTON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS
in
PAINTING

Portland State University
1992

TO THE OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES:

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would particularly like to thank Dick Muller, who was, while he was able, my advisor. His ideas on art resonated with me from the start, and his spiritual inspiration and certainty gave me the confidence to take the risks I needed to take. He was without question, one the the finest human beings that I have had the honor of knowing. I am so very grateful that he took the time to see me when he himself was so gravely ill. I learned and I continue to learn a tremendous amount from Dick about art, as I recall what he said and reach a deeper understanding of it as I paint. I also want to thank Mary Muller for her graciousness during my many visits to Dick this last year.

Thank you to all the members of my committee: to Byron Gardner for his beliefs about art which were a needed and valuable input, to Jim Hibbard, for taking over for Dick as my advisor, and for the inspiration from his delightful flights of imagination, and who also helped me immeasurably by his support and interest in the kind of art I wanted to do, to Robert Kasal for his wonderful support, both of my work and myself, for his help with all the paperwork, deadlines and details, and also for sharing his excellent teaching methods and experience with me, to Michihiro Kosuge for working with me, giving me moral support and always reminding me of the importance of experimentation and work, to Lucinda Parker for her excellent, straightforward, criticism and for coming over to PSU to sit on my committee, and to Margaret Shirley,

whose equally excellent criticism made me look and think harder about what I was doing.

Thank you to Barbara Branham for working with me and for reminding me of what was most important.

A special thank you to Mel Katz who took over my thesis hours for Dick and from whom I learned an extraordinary amount about formal issues and making art.

All my love to my family, whose inestimable patience and love were invaluable throughout the past two years.

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BACKGROUND

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.
The named is the mother of ten thousand things.
Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.
Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations.
These two spring from the same source but differ in name;
this appears as darkness.
Darkness within darkness.
The gate to all mystery.

—Tao Te Ching, Lao Tsu¹

A. A violent order is disorder; and
B. A great disorder is an order. These
Two things are one. (Pages of illustrations.)
—Wallace Stevens²

The process of art is, for me, one of discovery and learning, of change and transition—a metaphor for life.

I have discovered much about my work and myself in the last two years. The images and ideas I began with are still with me, but have been transformed. They are, however, still concerned with the visual representation of basic ideas of cycles, transition, and transformation.

Previous to coming to the MFA program at Portland State, I had, over the years, worked on a series of drawings which were related to the paintings I had done as an undergraduate. Although I did not produce an enormous body of work, I worked steadily, albeit slowly, on them. They maintained the connection with the work I would eventually do.

These drawings involved a number of representational images I had come to identify as "personal." I chose them because they had particular meanings and connections to events in my life, but I was also

aware that they could speak to others as well. They might have originated from my direct experience of pregnancy, birth or death, but I found the longer I used them, the more meanings they seemed to have. That is, I may have been attracted to the image for one or more reasons, but later discovered it also had multiple symbolic meanings. This increased its power and suitability. I began to see that the images had personal and universal meanings.

The original series of drawings were carefully drawn with graphite and ink. They contained multiple images of plant, root, animal and skeletal forms in various combinations. I was interested in combining these images so they might be read simultaneously as complete and also as part of, or merging with, each other. I was attempting to engage the entire surface rather than focus on a dominant figure and a ground. I was also interested in patterns of light/dark, positive/negative and their play over the surface.

In 1987, the drawings became more expressionistic. My method of drawing, previously a careful rendering of form, became less precise, done more quickly, and involved erasing, adding, subtracting, smearing. It was a more spontaneous interaction with the work. I began to focus on the human figure, skeletal forms, the hooded hawk and the salmon. I had used these images before, and my intention was to continue to develop them in the MFA program. I had expanded my materials at this point to include, along with graphite and ink, charcoal and pastels. I wanted to further expand my use of color, work larger, and eventually paint again. I had declared my allegiance to paper, as the surface of choice and was convinced that I would work on it for the duration. With

paper as the constant, everything else was open. The seductive danger of not knowing what my work would look like in two years lay ahead.

NOTES

¹Lao Tsu, Tao Te Ching. Vintage Books, New York, 1972, p. 3.

²Wallace Stevens, "Connoisseur of Chaos," The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1955, p. 215.

REPRESENTATIONAL/FIGURATIVE WORK

I began the MFA program producing drawings which were a continuation of previous work but quickly began to experiment with new ways of working. I worked with the salmon, the hooded hawk and the figure, transferring some of the drawings onto canvas and paper. I began to paint again, but at this stage, it was more like drawing, since I would draw over the paint with pastels and charcoal. I found that transferring what I considered to be a finished drawing into a painting did not work well for me. I did not think of drawings as preparatory sketches for paintings. When I began a drawing, I would, for example, begin with the idea of a non-specific figure or salmon. I would then sketch it in roughly and develop more particulars as I worked.

I was interested in shapes merging into one another and a layering or depth. In her book Cat's Eye, a story about a woman painter, Margaret Atwood relates an analogous idea in her description of time.

But I began then to think of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away.¹

This somewhat describes the concerns I had been working with all along. I had been and still was interested in the surface changing or shifting. I accomplished this by a synthesis of images and a combination of different media, which becomes apparent by shifting your eye or your physical vantage point. I was also then and now interested in the

internal layers, in both figurative and abstract terms. X-rays and photographs of the internal parts of the body, plants, animals or the earth are visually and intellectually fascinating. It is their limitless complexity and relationships to other forms that is so appealing.

In Figure 1, Head/Hawk, I attempted to realize this shifting perspective by using charcoal and graphite. The graphite cuts across the soft charcoal surface in what is to me a pleasing contrast of hard and shiny against soft and matte. The shapes are hardly distinguishable from certain angles, and it is only after looking awhile, that shapes and figures begin to emerge. I had previously used metallic paint and inks to accomplish this same kind of effect. I worked on a number of similar drawings using multiple images in each.

This multiplicity however, began to disappear in subsequent drawings, and the images became more reductive. I began to draw one figure, one fish; this was not quite satisfying, but I wanted to experiment. I was interested in what these images would convey when they were isolated, whether or not the associations connected with them would change. This isolation imbued the image with an importance that was further promoted by central placement on a (usually) blank background. They lost most details, and became gestural line drawings. It was the quality of the line that would convey the image. I also increased the scale of the paper and sometimes joined two large sheets. These drawings were mainly black and white; some had slight color. I began to use acrylic and watercolor paint, so that I might increase the size of the brushstroke to reflect the scale of the image. They became

Figure 1. Head/Hawk. 22" x 30".

less representational and more distilled and minimal—particularly the fish and hooded hawk. Figure 2, Salmon, and Figure 3, Hooded Hawk, are two examples of these drawings. They enabled me to experience the gesture on my own physical scale. I used my entire arm, instead of just my wrist, to make a line. These drawings, while challenging and provocative to produce, did not provide the visual complexity and multiplicity that I find so compelling.

I was also, at this same time, working on a series of self-portraits and still-life drawings. They were satisfying because of the emphasis on detail, the value changes, and the more clearly defined shapes. The relationships of large and small, light/dark, positive/negative, and a more studied consideration of these elements was appealing. These, at the time, seemed rather unrelated to the other work I was doing, but in retrospect, I see them as valuable. They kept me in touch with what I now see as an important part of my work: the range of scale, from large to small and the inclusion of smaller details. Figure 4, Still Life, and Figure 5, Self Portrait, are two of these drawings.

The image of the salmon was initially provocative because of its life cycle, which I see as quintessential. The spawning grounds of the salmon are an encapsulation of the elemental and inexplicable processes of life itself. The transformation of death into birth is unmistakable, since the salmon dies after spawning. I find a strange beauty in processes or in images that others may find morbid and repellent. They are to me a part of life and therefore fascinating, perhaps even more so, because of our seemingly natural reluctance to confront them. I did

Figure 2. Salmon. 30" x 44".

Figure 3. Hooded Hawk. 30" x 64".

Figure 4. Still Life. 22" x 30".

Figure 5. Self Portrait. 22" x 30".

a series of drawings of dead salmon, usually one fish, centrally placed on either a blank ground or a simple wash that might denote rocks or water. These are also rather expressionistic, with attention paid to certain details. I wanted my attitudes about the nature of the salmon's life cycle to be evident, and as I worked on them the implications of the image of the fish became more complex. The fish as a symbol has multiple meanings, both ancient and contemporary. The shape of the fish can refer to the mandorla—the early image of the female vulva, it is the symbol of the Christ in Jungian thought, and the salmon threatened with extinction has become one symbol of the endangered earth.

The image of a dead and rotting fish has a kind of beauty and appeal to me intellectually, because it is part of the ongoing cycle of life. On the other hand, visually, the physical layers of the dead fish itself was fascinating: the skin, the bones, the insides, the rocks, and the reflections in the water, it was repulsive and attractive at the same time. I love a paradox; I love an allegory—the salmon spoke to both of these kinds of ideas. I am most attracted to what is hidden and mysterious and that is what I want my work to reflect. I include four examples of these drawings, Figures 6 to 9, Salmon Series, since I intended for them to be shown in a group.

Figure 6. Salmon Series.

22" x 30".

Figure 7. Salmon Series.

22" x 30".

Figure 8. Salmon Series.

22" x 30".

Figure 9. Salmon Series.

22" x 30".

NOTES

¹Margaret Atwood, Cat's Eye. Doubleday, 1988, p.3.

ABSTRACT/OPEN-START WORK

Work of the eyes is done, now
go and do heart-work
on all the images imprisoned within you; for you
overpowered them: but even now you don't know them.
—Rainer Maria Rilke¹

Start painting with nothing, and let it grow.
—Kenzo Okada²

Whatever I see becomes my shapes and my condition.
—Willem deKooning³

The years when I was pursuing my inner images were the most
important in my life—in them everything essential was
decided. It all began then; the later details are only
supplements and clarifications of the material that burst
forth from the unconscious, and at first swamped me. It was
the prima materia for a lifetime's work.
—Carl Jung⁴

Open-start painting was not really very different than the way I
was already working. It just did not involve any preconceived idea or
image. I began with paintsticks, rags and turpentine; basically you put
on the color and wiped it off until images, shapes began to form. I had
to trust myself, and trust that the storehouse, the backlog of images,
experiences, ideas would take form as I worked. The images that are
important, from all the drawings, the paintings and the looking at the
world that one has done will be there. They are the foundation, the
basis of what the work will turn out to be. This is as it should be, it
seems. I think an artists' work should reflect who they
are; their view of life and the world.

As I began to produce paintings in the manner discussed above, it became clear to me that the images and shapes that appeared from the beginning were related to the images that I had always used. They were organic and eccentric. I was finding a personal vocabulary of shapes, and I have discovered, that like any language, this vocabulary has become more complex as it develops. Figure 10, Ova I, is one of these first experiments. As I worked on these pieces, and it became clear that the shapes were related to shapes in even my earliest drawings, this connection was lightly unsettling, but it gave me a needed confidence. The first pieces were all mixed media, which permitted a gradual transition from drawing to painting. I worked with only a few colors. I chose them randomly, but they began to have associations for me. I was particularly attached to black and made liberal use of it with the rather minimal color. In Figure 11, Diptych # 1, the contrasts are of interest to me: large and small shapes, more and less definition on either of the two sides. The larger shapes float on a black ground. The black was a way to resolve the background to isolate and articulate the assortment of shapes within the larger shapes, but the question became why not take this shape, these shapes to the edge of the rectangle? The shapes in the central image appeared to be "presented" apart from the ground. They were not really related to or part of each other. An over-all surface involvement was the next logical step. It was, in a way, a step backward, since I had interest in and had experimented with an overall image previously. Figure 12, Beginning/End, from 1989 demonstrates this interest.

Figure 10. Ova I. 30" x 44".

Figure 11. Diptych #1. 44" x 60".

Figure 12. Beginning/End. 22" x 30".

In one of many experiments, I isolated the small floating shapes of Figure 13, Diptych #2, and filled the picture plane with them. It was a minimal image, but the implications and considerations were myriad. What size should they be, what shape, what should the edges of the shapes be like, were they on top of or behind the field? I feel I learned and am still learning an extraordinary amount from grappling with these issues. Reducing the image to that degree has a way of crystallizing all the distinct formal problems. The relationships of each mark becomes so important. The questions of placement, line, texture, shape, color, value, outside shape, where they go, what they do, do they do anything, are the work of a few lifetimes. They are questions for every piece of artwork, but are particularly paramount in minimal work, since that is what the work is in many instances. My eye and brain, however, needed to see more going on, more detail, more changes of all these formal elements within one painting, so I increased the complexity. The major question is, if the shapes are to be on one plane can there be depth, can there be larger and smaller shapes, detail? Can they co-exist on the same plane, yet have depth? I don't want the surface to come out, to come forward, I want it to draw the viewer in, yet not set up a figure/ground relationship that is so strong that parts of the picture plane are lost as background. An ambiguity of figure/ground that can coexist with deeper space is what I am trying to accomplish.

The painting of the over-all surface, as in field painting, while having the layers that I desire, was not exactly what I wanted. Field painting is one world view, but not one to which I subscribe. It points

Figure 13. Diptych #2. 44" x 60".

to an underlying structure of the cosmos, (which might be quarks, at this point in scientific theory) of which everything is made. While an intellectually stimulating idea, I find variation in depth, sizes of shapes, strokes that range from large gestures to small cross hatching, and containment of color and value within shapes is more visually interesting. In Pollack's work, for example, "the additions of hundreds of layers of line.....serve to structure space in a dense, but readable series of planes."⁵ Each of these planes is one surface, laid down in a linear time frame, one over the other. Mark Tobey, however, while linked by some with Pollack, comes from a different sensibility. "Each of his paintings has a point of focus, and as 'all-over' as they may seem, there is always an internal logic to the progressions of forms and skeins of line."⁶ "He understood early, what many painters have come to understand since: that imaginative man can shift his perspective endlessly. He can see a surface closely in all its dense detail, or he can see it from a distance in its integrity."⁷ My interest was to expand this shifting perspective to include larger and smaller shapes. A Chinese landscape, for example, can engage the entire surface, yet include larger shapes that do not dominate, perhaps because of the over-all activity. I wasn't interested in trying to repeat what Pollack or Tobey had done. I mention them, because when discussing my work, the type of painting they did is often referred to as an ideal that I might look to.

The irregular, organic shapes that I was painting were interesting to me because they referred to shapes I had always used, but I did sometimes ask myself why not use geometric shapes? I came across what

I consider to be an excellent explanation of why I choose the shapes I do while reading CHAOS, by James Gleick. His discussion of a theory as to why the "vogue for geometrical architecture and painting came and went.....[is that] They fail to resonate with the way nature organizes itself or with the way human perception sees the world."⁸ "A geometrical shape has scale, a characteristic size describable with just a few numbers.....art that satisfies lacks scale, in the sense that it contains important elements of all sizes."⁹

While Diptych #1 was approaching what I wanted to have happen, it still relied on the figure on a ground to present the central image. In Figure 13, Diptych #2, which was the same format and materials, the shapes were distributed more evenly over the surface, and although it also has a dominant central shape, the color surrounding it diminished its dominance, as do the smaller shapes. At this same time I was working on a larger piece, Figure 14, Turning Point, which is on canvas. It had been through many changes, attempting in the beginning to be an over-all field painting. It ended with a stronger shape, that once again, tries to step away from strong figure/ground sensibility by virtue of the surrounding color and shapes. This painting was a point of transition, in that the ambiguity of the space became more apparent. The small floating shapes become yet another layer, whose relation to figure/ground was painted to be equally ambiguous. It also expresses an energy I want to portray. This painting was satisfying, because it began to approach what I thought I wanted to see. That was, perhaps a major problem, for in fact, I did not know exactly what I wanted to see. I had, on one level, a vague idea, a vague notion, and on another level,

Figure 14. Turning Point. 40" x 57".

even in the midst of all this vagueness, I felt I absolutely knew what it was and could achieve it. This painting is also important, because it was at this point that I abandoned a favorite color: black. This was very difficult, because I love it and had come to rely on it. Reliance on it was reason by itself to give it up. Instead, I began to experiment with chromatic blacks and greys and found that the range of their complexity far surpassed that of black from the tube or black charcoal. There are few true blacks in this painting, most of the dark areas are chromatic greys.

I also began, at this point to work on wooden panels and stretched canvas. I prepared them with rabbit skin glue and lead white. The lead white is an incredibly beautiful surface to work on—soft and absorbent. Building the stretcher, stretching the canvas, and preparing it with natural, traditional materials is appealing in a time-honored, ritualistic sense.

Figure 15, Untitled, is a triptych in which three 36"x54" wooden panels hang together. These sections would hang together as one panel, but present the shape of the rectangle on two levels: the three vertical panels and the over-all horizontal panel. This was interesting to me because it both increases the awareness that this is a painting, and it intensifies the intrusion of the geometric and provides a kind of structure on these rather random shapes. Another question is how random or how spontaneous would these paintings be. This one began with gestural strokes that I see as a springboard to launch my involvement with it. I establish something to work from with these gestures. They open the door, and I then apply layers of paint and wipe or sand them

Figure 15. Untitled. 54" x 108".

off until shapes begin to suggest themselves. At this point I begin to define shapes which range from large to small, and I sometimes return to the larger strokes. It is a process that involves a number of paint applications. There is a point where the large strokes give way to smaller. I want the involvement of working with detail and shapes of diverse sizes, something stopping with larger gestural strokes does not allow. Process, though very important to the work, is not the solitary issue. It is part of the means to define the images.

The larger scale of these and subsequent paintings involves the viewer (and myself) on a physical level, that is very different than a smaller piece. Perception is considerably altered dependent upon the physical relationship of the viewer to the painting. At close range, some shapes disappear and details appear, while farther away shapes and different details can be observed.

Exploration of color as value and its use in realizing a surface that still has depth and variations in the sizes of the shapes are directions this painting (Figure 15) took. Color can be used to promote a difference, and yet the value range can deny a major shift back and forth.

Figure 16, Untitled, and Figure 17, Untitled, are two triptychs on canvas which involve the same ideas. I was interested in color as value, but also in varying it to suggest different images. As I worked on these paintings, they again evoked recollections of internal and external parts of the human body, animals, plants, trees, fish and other sea creatures. These were familiar images, although not previously presented abstractly. I began both paintings with gestural strokes.

Figure 16. Untitled. 54" x 108".

Figure 17. Untitled. 60" x 108".

One might see it as a contradiction, on one hand to begin with broad strokes and then go on to another way of working. I do not see it as such, because the strokes, like the shapes, are of a substantial range of large to small. Each painting and the whole of the work are the same in that they are an evolution, but they are about the same kinds of issues. Each painting while not the same as the last, has elements that are similar, and the over-all view of the work has consistent concerns and images.

In Figure 18, C.R.G., and Figure 19, Untitled, two vertically presented diptychs, Figure 18, does not have the central figures that are strong in most of the other work. It has smaller shapes that are not as resolved or defined. The shapes, though abstract, are still illusionistic in that they evoke associations with representational images in the viewer. This connection with what we perceive to be the real world is important to me. In Figure 19, the shapes are more strongly presented and the light/dark contrast is more extreme. The large scale of these paintings, particularly on the vertical, reinforces a feeling that they are doors that one can walk into, or figures that tower over you. A tall vertical elicits an entirely different response than a strong horizontal. The horizontal has associations with the landscape, the horizon line, and is a more tranquil shape than the less stable sensibility of a very strong vertical. I am intrigued with these responses, and their implications. Scale is an area where I intend to continue experimenting, and, although I see the whole of it as experimentation and exploration, it is a primary focus at this point.

Figure 18. C.R.G.. 45" x 87".

Figure 19. Untitled. 36" x 96".

NOTES

¹Rainer Maria Rilke, "Turning Point," The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke. Edited and Translated by Stephen Mitchell, Vintage Books, New York, 1984, p. 135.

²Eric Protter, Painters and Painting. Grosset and Dunlop, New York, 1971, p. 242.

³Selman Rodman, Conversations with Artists. Capricorn Books, New York, 1961, p. 94.

⁴Carl G. Jung, Memories, Dreams and Reflections. Vintage Books, New York, 1965, p. 199.

⁵Dore Ashton, The Unknown Shore: A View of Contemporary Art. Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1962, p.128

⁶Ibid, p.119.

⁷Ibid, p.118.

⁸James Gleick, Chaos, Making a New Science. Viking Penguin, Inc., New York, 1987, p. 116.

⁹Ibid, p.117.

CONCLUSION/INFLUENCES

The beliefs of the day are said to influence the art work. The concepts of multiplicity and microcosm/macrocosm in an Indian temple echo Indian ideas of the cosmos and creation; the fixed perspective of the Renaissance reflects the prevailing view of God at that time, one God who created and ran the universe. Current theories on origins of the cosmos—"big-bang," expanding universe, finite boundaries, infinite boundaries—indicate that we are not so sure. Steven Hawking even suggests that there might be two kinds of time, real and imaginary. He proposes that "the so-called imaginary time is really the real time, and what we call real time is just a figment of our imaginations."¹ What we have theorized to be an expanding universe, is an illusion that we perceive, because, "if the universe is really completely self-contained, having no boundary or edge, it would have neither beginning or end: it would simply be."² Religions and mystics have spoken of this idea. The mind of man and the mind of God—or the big mind and the little mind. Perhaps a finished piece of art work in some way tries to mimic this state of just "being." No matter what its subject or image, a painting is fixed in time. The adherents to Zen Buddhism know this; to them, painting is Zen.

These speculations point to the fact that there is no consensus of belief in the world today. It is up to the individual to choose a belief system. The post-modern art world certainly indicates that the choice is indeed open.

I think the artwork you really love probably influences you, or maybe you love it because it reflects what you are interested in in your own work. Regardless of what the truth might be, some of the artists or kinds of art that I have looked at a lot include the Chinese and Japanese landscape painters, Chinese bronzes and ceramics; Indian temples, sculpture and painting; Persian Art; Bosch, Goya, Velazquez, Matisse, Manet, Degas, Hubert and Jan van Eyck, Robert Campin, the Limbourg Brothers, Whistler, Cezanne, Ryder, Grunewald, Tamayo, Bacon, and Tobey.

Francis Bacon, one of my favorite painters since I was a teenager, was fascinating to me early on, because of his excellent sense of alienation and horror. Those solitary, screaming figures imprisoned within cage-like bars encapsulated the isolated state of humanity to me in my early years. I don't think I ever subscribed completely to his bleak vision, but the darkness of it is still appealing.

Dark visions have always fascinated me; I believe it is the mystery. A background of Roman Catholicism, no doubt magnified what probably is a basic need for ritual and attraction to unknown mysteries and visual complexity. What could match the dramatic experience of the Friday evening Lenten stations-of-the-cross, sitting in a dark, candle-lit church, overwhelmed by the end of the service with the aromatic, stifling fumes of the hypnotically swinging incense burner? Images of blood, pain and suffering. On Good Friday, this spectacle was further intensified by the black shrouds covering every statue.

The next morning, Easter Sunday, was dazzling, ecstatic; the dark had been superseded by light. The priest and servers wore brilliant

white garments, the statues and crucifix were uncovered, and there were flowers everywhere. An awe-inspiring, miraculous transformation had occurred.

I saw an exhibition of Bacon's paintings in New York in 1975, and I understood what had drawn me all along. All that existentialism was there, but for me, more than that, was the depth of the figures themselves. The shapes that defined the figures contained shifting levels of flesh that changed before my eyes. I looked at those figures for hours.

I had a similar experience once in Seattle, looking at Mark Tobey's paintings. Those layers of images that could shift back and forth, entranced me. Close inspection reveals more depth the closer and longer you look.

In his poem, "The Far Field," Theodore Roethke reveals a similar sensibility:

All finite things reveal infinitude;
The mountain with its singular bright shade
Like the blue shine on freshly frozen snow,
The after-light upon ice-burdened pines;
Odor of basswood on a mountain-slope,
A scent of beloved bees;
Silence of water above a sunken tree;
The pure serene of memory in one man,—
A ripple widening from a single stone
Winding around the waters of the world.³

This ripple to which Roethke refers, is discussed in Chaos, where Gleik refers to it as the "Butterfly Effect," meaning that the flutter of one butterfly's wing, can and does affect all else on this planet, if not the cosmos.⁴

Chris Ray, a visiting philosophy professor at PSU, in a lecture to our graduate seminar this past year, showed a photograph of what looked as if it could be the milky way on a clear, moonless night, a field of what appeared to be thousands of white dots on a dark background. The rejoinder to the question of what this image was, turned out to be that it was a photograph of the "empty" space between the clusters of stars in the milky way. Trying to grasp the immensity of what we can see is an impossibility; endeavoring to assimilate what we cannot is truly overwhelming. How little we know, or as it is so succinctly put on the gravestone of Kurt Schwitters, MAN KANN JA NIE WISSEN—"You'll never know."

In a short story called "Pigeonfeathers," by John Updike, a boy who is beginning to ask philosophical questions and can find no answers, sees the Void and is overcome with horror. Through a series of circumstances, when he is burying some pigeons, whom he thinks of as "worthless birds," he discovers:

The feathers were more wonderful than dog's hair, for each filament was shaped within the shape of the feather, and the feathers in turn were trimmed to fit a pattern that flowed without error across the bird's body. He lost himself in the geometrical tides as the feathers now broadened and stiffened to make an edge for flight, now softened and constricted to cup warmth around the mute flesh. And across the surface of the infinitely adjusted yet somehow effortless mechanics of the feathers played idle designs of color, no two alike, designs executed, it seemed, in a controlled rapture, with a joy that hung level in the air above and behind him.⁵

While it may be true, that we "will never know," it does not have to fill us with utter despair, for because of this boy's discovery of the beauty and perfection in these inconsequential pigeons, he then

has crusty coverings lifted from him, and with a feminine, slipping sensation along his nerves that seemed to give the air hands, he was robed with this certainty: that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever.⁶

This story is relevant to me because I also believe the horror of life, which always seems to be beside us, is ultimately wonder and beauty and that, like David in this story, we can realize it if we are able to lose ourselves as he did or we can step back far enough to see it.

The concept of microcosm/macrocosm may be seen as equally miraculous when observing the similar shapes of a branching tree and the x-ray view of branching in a human lung, or a hurricane viewed in a photograph from above, a photograph of the whirlpool galaxy in Canes Venatici, and the cross-section of a chambered nautilus shell. The recapitulation and interrelatedness of the world of our perception is to me a source of inspiration.

We sometimes think we see the world around us so clearly, and telescopes and microscopes enable us to see that which is not visible with the naked eye, yet there is a reality we cannot see, nor grasp intellectually. I believe that art is a way to relate to this reality. As Jimake Highwater says in his book, Primal Mind,

The complex process by which the artist transforms the act of seeing into a vision of the world is one of the consummate mysteries of the arts—one of the reasons that art is inseparable from religion and philosophy for most tribal peoples. This act of envisioning and then engendering a work of art represents an important and powerful ritual. Making images is one of the central ways by which humankind ritualizes experience and gains personal and tribal access to the ineffable...the unspeakable and ultimate substance of reality.⁷

If my painting can suggest, or even allude to these mysteries, then I have accomplished what I desire.

Einstein once said that, "knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world."⁸

Or to quote from The Blue Guitar, a poem by Wallace Stevens,

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said then, "But play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are."⁹

NOTES

¹Steven W. Hawking, A Brief History of Time. Bantam Books, New York, 1988, p.139.

²Ibid, p.141.

³Theodore Roethke, "The Far Field," Roethke, Collected Poems. Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961, p. 199.

⁴James Gleick, op.cit., Chapter 1.

⁵John Updike, "Pigeonfeathers," Pigeonfeathers, and Other Stories. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1962, p.149-50.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Jimake Highwater, The Primal Mind: Vision and Reality in Indian America. New American Library, New York, 1981, p. 58.

⁸Dore Ashton, op. cit., p. 228.

⁹Wallace Stevens, op. cit., p. 165.

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