The Dream of Being Totally Open

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The Dream of Being Totally Open

by

Frederick Greis

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of the requirements for the degree of
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I. Spirituality and Painting

“When people have a hard time with the word spirituality they’re assuming spirituality is something extra-mystical on top of what we all know to be true. But that’s just a big pile of steaming shit, because really what’s at stake here is a question of what’s real, and when one tries to engage with serious questions about what is real, then things can get very mysterious and spooky.”

- Chris Martin

Spirituality, for good reason, is often associated with New Age cults, scam artists, anti-scientific sentiment, reactionary politics, and holier-than-thou practitioners. Contemporary art, at least in New York City, is ostensibly progressive and critical, so any whiff of sincere spirituality in an artwork made today can seem either ironic or simply out of place. However, spirituality and mysticism have been embedded in art throughout history, even with the advent of modernism and abstract art. There is a tendency to see abstraction as a continuation of the rational turn away from religious experience that started during the Enlightenment and continued through modernism. Paintings before the Enlightenment era would often direct the viewer to visually understand gods, prophets, religious officials, idols, icons, and symbols as holy, important, and above all else, worthy of the power they held in whatever society the paintings existed in. Among other methods, the employment of perspectival space, as a way to reflect religious hierarchies of importance, is in stark contrast with the modernist trope of the grid, reflecting a more democratic, egalitarian approach to space.

Yet what often gets obscured in this broad sociological assessment of modernism’s turn away from religion, is that many modernist painters were still intensely concerned with evoking some kind of religious or spiritual experience, but not necessarily with religion as an institution.

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and social force. In discussing the reception of his work, the painter, Mark Rothko noted [emphasis mine]:

“I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions — tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on — and the fact that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures show that I communicate those basic human emotions...The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you, as you say, are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point.”

Although I am certainly not having a religious experience when making my work, the relationship to the “point” of it and that of Rothko’s is similar: my goal is not to say something interesting about color theory or optics, but to evoke, broadly speaking, a spiritual experience. I am interested in a state of openness that allows the viewer to feel a greater range and intensity of emotions. While feelings of momentary happiness and pleasure are certainly welcome outcomes, I am more interested in the satisfying feeling of not holding back any emotions that may be present for the viewer; positive, negative or otherwise. I want to create experiences where the barriers between the viewers themselves and their lives; between the viewers themselves and the world, melt away. In short, I want to elicit an experience of deep unburdening, bewilderment, and wonder.

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II. Nature as Self

“The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and vegetable”

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

The paintings in my thesis show owe a tremendous debt to the history of landscape painting. Nineteenth century Romantic painters such as Caspar David Friedrich, Ivan Aivazovsky, Thomas Cole, John Martin, and J. M. W. Turner presented light and space in a way that evoked a feeling of liberating vastness, which in its best moments, suggested an experience beyond oneself. Viewed from a socio-political standpoint, often those same feelings of vastness were employed to perpetuate religious parables or imperial projects. Portrayals of the American landscape as an inviting, Edenic wilderness (as opposed to land already occupied by indigenous peoples) dovetailed with the ideology of Manifest Destiny and westward expansion. In addition to its fraught history, there is another aspect of the Romantic painters that I am trying to move away from with my paintings. The type of looking that many Romantic paintings invite is a gazing upon, or an imagining of, an external vista. The type of looking that I hoping to create is one that is not merely gazing upon an external scene, but one that engages with felt experience of having an inner self, and all of the emotional, psychological, and spiritual feelings that are embedded in that self.

It was early 20th century painters such as Georgia O’Keeffe and her contemporaries that accomplished expressing a union between natural vistas and the inner self. O’Keeffe, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, and others employed abstraction to imbue natural subjects with potential meanings not possible with Realist and Romantic paintings. Abstraction allowed a painting of a
lake to not simply be a beautiful lake, but evoke deeply personal feelings regarding oneself, and one’s own body.

It is one thing to feel moved by a beautiful scene of nature, it is another to feel a sense of recognition and identity with the world around oneself. This recognition is completely different than the mere intellectual knowledge that we, as humans, are molecularly connected to the natural biological and chemical cycles of the universe. Instead, the recognition I am referring to is non-intellectual; it is a deep sense of innate identity. To experience that identity is to be unburdened from the perpetual churn of interiority and anxiety.

These paintings are not a reflection of an idealization of the concept of nature itself. The 20th century painter, Marsden Hartley said “I have made the complete return to nature, and nature is, as we all know, primarily and intellectual idea.” The strange and shimmering paintings of Charles Burchfield are proof that this kind of electric engagement with the world need not make distinctions between the natural and the human-made: his subjects often included building, streets, and towns. What those paintings accomplish is to bring this kinds of pulsating absorption, usually associated with the sublime, to the everyday world. In his best work, Burchfield’s buildings appear just as alive and organic as the flora that often surrounded them, giving their forms the same quivering lines, and painting them with similar radiating colors. In addition to treating the human-made as organic, he also accomplished this everyday-as-sublime transformation by evoking a different sense of time. Consider the sense of time in human-made environments: discrete units of time, punctuated with various responsibilities, oftentimes with a feeling of being rushed or that time is “slipping away”. In contrast, one’s sense of time in more

natural environments is more ambiguous: time can feel as if it has slowed down, or does not exist at all, or only does so in relation to physical phenomena (the sun moving in the sky, the movement of cast shadows along the ground, etc.) It is this slower, more ambiguous sense of time that is more conducive to reverie and self-awareness. In many of his paintings, Burchfield brought this sense of time and reverie to his subjects, both organic and inorganic. Similarly, my paintings do not attempt to idealize nature, but rather reflect my desire to bring the sense of wonder and time [or lack thereof] in the natural world into our everyday world.

In his essay Nature Symbolized: American Painting from Ryder to Hartley, Charles Eldredge describes Arthur Dove’s paintings as “abstractions of organic process, visions of cause and spirit rather than outline and surface.” Similarly, my paintings are not about fidelity to any particular scene or object in the world, but about “spirit”. Eldredge noted that both Dove and O’Keeffe created “forms without explicit reference, and a sense of meaning without specific objects”. Despite the fact that I am making work more than a hundred years after them, the project of creating “meaning without specific objects” feels like a worthwhile and contemporary endeavor. I do not want to provide a vehicle for any theoretical statement, nor to impart descriptive information about the world. Rather my goal is to create the felt experience of meaning, or to reveal a sense of being that does not rely on conceptual and narrative constructs for meaning. I feel an urgency to explore this sense of being, since it seems that most contemporary narratives that try to pin down the meaning of life tend to fall apart under nihilistic scrutiny of dualistic and materialist frameworks.

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Because of this, I seek to find a robust source of meaning in the world. Religious narratives are at best, difficult to believe, and at worst, actively harming people. Logical positivist attempts find meaning in scientific progress feels hollow, finite, and unfulfilling. Even the best ideological structures for orienting oneself in the world still leave the subjective experience of angst and meaningless as an unaddressed problem. Personally, I have found that in moments of great angst and existential dread, the refreshing freedom from meaningless did not return by “figuring out” a philosophical truth. Instead, the problem required a categorical shift in consciousness: away from dualistic notions of separation of subject and object (“I” and the world), and towards an experience of being where that separation is nonexistent, irrelevant, or negligible. That shift usually occurred after listening to a moving piece of music, feeling a sense of vastness in nature, or quieting my mind through zazen\(^6\).

Interestingly enough, this shift is often accompanied with an intuitive sense that this more open state of being has a greater degree of reality than that of the existential dread and paranoia. This observation is critical to how I think of my painting’s relationship to a perceived sense of reality. I am not attempting to create pleasant dreams to distract the viewer from unpleasant existential angst; instead I am trying to create paintings that rouse them from the bad dream of meaningless and alienation.

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\(^6\) Zazen is commonly understood as a form of mediation from the Zen school of Buddhism, but there is some debate on the degree to which the word “mediation” accurately describes the practice of zazen. From the book *Three Pillars of Zen*: “Zazen must not be confused with meditation. Meditation, in the beginning at least, involves fixing one’s mind on an idea or an object...the uniqueness of zazen lies in this: that the mind is freed from bondage to all thought-forms, visions, objects, and imaginings, however sacred or elevating, and brought to a state of absolute emptiness, from which alone it may one day perceive its own true nature, or the nature of the universe. Such initial exercises as counting or following the breath cannot, strictly speaking, be called meditation since they do not involve visualization of an object or reflection upon an idea.” (Kapleau 13)
III. Permission and Pleasure

One may be able to imagine a situation where after walking out of a group art show, one realizes that the piece of art they may have thought was the best was in fact different than the piece with which they were most absorbed by. In discussing the former, one could talk about cultural importance, topicality, art-historical referents, etc. In describing the latter, one might have a much more difficult time. Oftentimes, one feels strongly about a work for reasons that are wholly un-intellectual, or even irrational. This chasm between a purely intellectual appreciation and a visceral emotional absorption perhaps contributes to the staying power of the modernist truism that “artwork should speak for itself”.

In a way, all artworks do “speak for themselves” but there are also many voices speaking all the time: the voices of the viewer’s memory, associations, and social norms, as well as the implicit and explicit voices of the institution where the work is located. In some circumstances, in order to allow for a more engaged experience with a work, it becomes crucial to engage with those voices that surround and shape the work. In writing about my work, I do not intend to throw up a smokescreen of conceptual diversions. I hope to address those voices that obscure the work, removing them from the experience.

Defining what a “good” painting is, with all of its elitist and classist baggage, implicitly prohibits certain materials, subjects, and techniques. Suspect materials might include craft supplies, glitter, collaged flower catalogs, and free public-domain stock photos from the internet. Techniques that would raise an eyebrow might include blended gradients, glowing effects, and indulgence and very saturated colors. These techniques conjure connotations of science-fiction, commercial advertisements, and cartoons and other media marketed towards children. All of
these connotations refer to media that has been historically undervalued or seen as “low” forms of media, despite their tremendous influence, creative potential, and in the case of science-fiction, speculative power to think critically about society.

Subjects that might seem intellectually dubious or problematic are the consciousness of plants, telepathic animal communication, utopian thinking, nostalgia, love, dream recall, and mystical experiences. While I may have critical reservations about these subjects as well, I still think they are fruitful and exciting subjects to explore via painting. That is not to say that I am treating these subjects as discrete intellectual topics—quite the opposite: I am allowing myself to engage with ideas that I either believe, partially believe, or want to believe. I think a painting is far more peculiar, engaging, and meaningful if it does not provide an answer or set of viewpoints, but rather asks a question in such a way that exposes a fissure between one's intellectual assumptions and felt experience.

Often, this assertion of belief manifests in the form of commitment, unabashedness, or even over-indulgence. For example, the inclusion of “low” materials such as glitter is nothing new for contemporary art. What I am interested is the point at which these materials and subjects do more than just signal their social connotations. In other words, I want to know if it is possible to truly feel the sublime looking at painting, and more importantly, if is it possible to feel a sense of the sublime because of the way glitter was employed. Similarly, what would it means to see a painting in which it was implied that birds had a complex interior consciousness and the painting also gave the viewer an implication that this could actually happen or even be believed.
My work moves past the prohibitions on pleasure, catharsis, oneness. By allowing myself to engage with undervalued subjects, materials, and beliefs, I hope to give the viewer a similar sense of freedom: a freedom to feel the world, and to feel it without embarrassment.
IV. Humor and Arational Experience

*What better feeling is there than seeing your greatest fears turn from steel to dust? When your all-imprisoning thoughts turn to driftwood in a vast ocean? And wouldn’t you laugh if it happened because the way the light cascaded off a pile of dirty laundry, or because of the peculiar shape of a fallen leaf?*

To “feel the world” or to “see nature as oneself” is not a cerebral or intellectual exercise. The burdens addressed or resolved by these kinds of experiences are not simply intellectual, but bodily, emotional, and lived in: existential angst (ie. “what is the purpose of life?”), alienation from nature and the world, and a deep longing for a meaningful life. Hence, a dissolution or resolution of those burdens would have to operate and affect aspects of consciousness beyond the intellect. Here, paintings offer a unique possibility for addressing those burdens, since it can affect aspects of consciousness outside of the intellect. Consciousness of one’s body, feeling emotions, and a profound sense of meaning are not necessarily rational experiences, nor are they irrational experiences. Painting offers a kind of short circuit to these experiences since it can operate in a similar arational way.

The arational experience of responding emotionally to two colors next to each other is analogous to laughing at two juxtaposed things that are not normally associated with each other. In these paintings, the presence of humor is usually not a goal, but a side effect of arational short circuiting. To arrive at a profound sense of meaning without the “thinking mind” produces an incredulousness, even silliness, that I believe is just as freeing as a cathartic emotional response. There is nothing in these paintings that are “jokes”; they are not intended to make the viewer laugh at a particular subject. Instead, the paintings propose an experience that makes those aforementioned burdens seem immaterial; the existential fears become the worthless joke.
**Bibliography**


The following photos are from the thesis exhibition that took place at the 205 Hudson Street gallery, in New York, NY. The exhibition was open from May 9 through May 25, 2019.

All artworks were completed in 2019.

Individual Works:

1. Title: *What was once impossible is now effortless*  
   Media: oil on canvas  
   Dimensions: 71" x 70"

2. Title: *Rainwater Collection Refuge*  
   Media: oil, clay, glass beads, glitter on canvas  
   Dimensions: 71" x 58"

3. Title: *Entrance Stone*  
   Media: oil and collage on canvas  
   Dimensions: 51" x 54"

4. Title: *Shared Harvest*  
   Media: oil on canvas  
   Dimensions: 87" x 84"

5. Title: *Last Remembered Thing*  
   Media: oil on canvas  
   Dimensions: 37" x 38"

6. Title: *Sitting Aura*  
   Media: oil on canvas  
   Dimensions: 67" x 64"

Exhibition Installation Photos

7. Exhibition installation view 1

8. Exhibition installation view 2

9. Exhibition installation view 3

10. Exhibition installation view 4
Images of individual works

1.
Images of exhibition installation

7.

8.