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Becoming the Atma

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THE UNIVERSITY of CALGARY

Becoming the Atma

by

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A THESIS

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Abstract

Yoga is union. Sometimes defined in contemporary culture as a union between mind and body, it is in fact the union between our selves and the hidden sources of phenomenal reality. One of the primary features of a state of *Yoga* is a silent mind: meditation. My practice uses meditation as a creative instrument to generate forms and images that reflect or transmit an inner life and evolution. In particular, plastic elements like line, rhythm, colour and space can express a subtle knowledge, an "inner" knowledge which is spiritual, or non-phenomenal in nature. A key function of mental silence in the studio is to enable a state I call "vibrant flow" in which limiting ideas and conditionings are restricted in their ability to interfere with intuition's hints from beyond the rational, time bound mind.

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to Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi,
my Guru and so much more, to whom I owe it all

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Absurd Buses and Himalayan Nights

I smudged the glass with my fingers and peered at the bouncing jungle, wondering, “where should we be now? I don’t know, at least seven hours till Kathmandu”.

I stared into inky black, teeth rattled by the absurd bus with its vinyl upholstered plywood benches and riot of colours, now shrouded in utter night. The bus was rather full of unconscious Nepalese and Indians who bounced about like marionettes in their sleep. It really was an absurd bus—its suspension seemingly designed to amplify rather than absorb the irregularities of the mountain road from the Nepalese-Indian border to Kathmandu. I dozed impossibly through the tumult, until I was woken by the bus not bouncing me about. It slowed at an utterly remote stop along the mountain road. It could have been a dream as children, mothers with babies, grandparents, great grandparents and men smoking cigarettes materialized out of wild jungle and onto the bus from God knows where on their way to God knows where. Beautiful and foreign, the dark eyes of the Nepalese mountaineers were unfocused at the late hour. Glass bangles jangled and the smells of food spices, fragrant perspiration, jasmine, and hair oil made an intoxicating blend with the blossoms and earth of the Himalayan night air. The cold draft sharpened the senses, and wonder and fascination wrapped the moment and slowed it. Suddenly alert, fascinated, I watched the bus fill to capacity, and yet continue to fill, then stuff, then finally cram, till the remnants of the beautiful ambrosial multitude could be heard settling themselves on the roof among the luggage, presumably huddling together against what was sure to be a chill several hours of smoking and laughing, rolled up like their cigarettes in thin wool shawls.

The little boys and girls had been carried back with the boarding passengers, evidently unconcerned about where their mothers and grandmothers were, and settled into laps. Among the standing, babies slept oblivious, slung on hips in the picturesque manner of Asian mothers. As the bus lurched forward, the smaller children were tossed, but such was the airtight arrangement of the passengers that there was no room for anyone to fall. Not a word was spoken, perhaps some murmurs, infants croaked or sighed, and I shuffled restless in my seat, feeling guilt and compassion—it must have been about four in the morning, “where were they going?” I watched

a little girl standing, swaying; it was hard to tell because Nepalese are small, but I felt this girl was younger than my youngest sister, maybe two or three. The poor thing was neither asleep nor awake, swooning with fatigue, but with no room to do anything but bounce on the hips of the pungent crowd about her. My heart was touched as I watched the pitiful scene, and impulsively I scooped up the tender girl with her bird bones and her tinkling anklets and held her tight and warm to my breast, smoothing the stray hairs from her forehead affectionately. The children on the absurd bus belonged to everyone and to no one, unless it be that they all belonged to the *Parabramha*, the all pervading spirit which is as real to processions boarding Himalayan buses as night and cold air.

Blue-green twilight gently followed night; a brilliant valley appeared beneath sheer slopes to the left terminating in madly rushing waters, magnificent hills hemmed in the valley above keeping the journey in shade for the early morning. As the mountain road became more difficult to negotiate, bleak concrete dwellings were replaced by fantastic little stone homesteads and out-buildings whose upper stories perched on ancient timbers, grey with age. The railings and sills were wood, ornate and carved, and everything appeared to be in miniature. The all-pervading spirit which inhabited the soul of every passenger on the bus was flowing, torrential like the waters among the valley floor. My eyes lost focus and the paddle ball game the plywood seat was playing with my backside became remote as the valley emerged from dawn to full daylight—something was starting to happen, as real and as intimate as the sun clearing the horizon high, high above us. As if with a snap, time and space released and became elastic as the elements from which the valley was formed became tangible. The bones of the earth and the unfathomable depth of rock beneath our tires was as an ocean, stirring in its depths, profound and conscious, wearing a kaleidoscope of morning greens, ochres and greys as a cloak. Though it flowed far below, the sound of the downward rush of the mountain river was drowning out the noisy engine and crunching tires. The beams of sunlight that pierced the mist in the pass above turned the grey mountainside gold and green, its shafts pregnant with fire, its light stirring, but flowing neither forward nor backward, rather flowing into and out of itself. The light was illuminating the valley not as a lamp throws light on the objects that fall beneath its beams, but rather the light within

every particle of earth, water and air was stirred and awakened by the sunlight's arrival in the valley. *Tableau*. The word floated into my mind. My mind had been utterly still—without a single thought to stir the calm reflection of the transcendent vision on the surface of my consciousness. The reflected splendour rippled slightly. *Tableau*. Again the word slowly stirred the workings of my mind from profound and quiet meditation. I saw a picture of myself from outside, a brown cherub in fuchsia and green cotton, silver bangles, a scarlet cardigan, and dusty grey feet was curled convulsively in my lap. Her heavy black braid was shedding rivulets of oily curls to frame her round face and accent her thick curling eyelashes. There was no bus between the valley and I with the god-child clinging to my breast. The edge of the mountain track sped past as we ascended the brightening valley with its whitewashed stone buildings crowned with the silver grey hand-worked wood and slate roofs arranged like scales of fishes. Rhododendrons littered the mountainside in a riot of purple and pink and coral, and the mists of falling waters roared among the gorges of the valley, their plumes dancing with the columns of sunlight. I watched myself from beyond myself as the fontanel bone at the crown of my head dissolved, and a column of energy flowed from the base of my spine, flowing not down, but upward filling me then flowing cool from out of the top of my head, finally returning to my body and dissolving it into a blissful tapestry of wind, water, fire, earth, and energy.

I opened my eyes. A tiny woman was shaking my shoulder and grinning above me displaying gold teeth. She wordlessly indicated to the rather ordinary looking Nepalese girl in my lap, and I lifted the sleeping child into her mother's waiting arms. I uncrooked stiff legs and wobbled out on to the gravel where the bus had parked and surveyed it in the midday sun. It wasn't just absurd, it was impossible. The bus was crowned with a lavender roof, it was decorated like a cake with some kind of decorative tin strips that shone like chrome where the filigrees of icing would be. Instead of candles or cherries, the bus was topped with luggage and a satisfied looking boy of about fourteen smoking, too bored to stretch his legs on the ground and chat loudly with the other boys. An absolute riot of verses or slogans festooned the rest of the bus in what was presumably Nepalese script, except where little vignettes with *trompe l'oeil* frames were painted with Hindu deities. Durga was resplendent astride a tiger with her dozens of arms, each wielding a

blood-smeared weapon. She had her foot placed on the neck of a decapitated bull, a demon with a handlebar moustache was emerging from the massive wound brandishing a scimitar, and finding himself impaled on the Goddess's mighty pike. Elsewhere, Shiva was meditating in his tiger skin ascetic's robe, his pale skin the colour of moonlight to match the sliver of a young moon that adorned his matted hair, gathered in a topknot. He was surrounded by a motley crew of demons and unruly men sporting all manner of physical handicaps, the white bull Nandi kneeling in supplication before His cross-legged form. Divine life was flowing from Shiva's fontanel bone, through the topknot of his tangled hair, upward and downward like a fountain, and it gathered at His feet to form the source of the river Ganges. On the side of the bus's hood, Bal Krishna, Krishna in the form of a child, was dancing with the *gopis*, the milkmaids, to the tune of the flute he touched with his red lips, melody expressed in his little body, his black hair shedding rivulets of oily curls to frame his round indigo face and to accent his curling eyelashes. Atop the steps into the bus beside the drivers console was a shrine to Lord Ganesha. The eternal Lord of innocence was cast in bronze, and smeared with red paste, hemmed in all around with electric candles, silver and scarlet tinsel, and a brass altar where rose scented incense and sandalwood burned. His elephant head with its cherubic cheeks was rosy red, fanned by his great ears and festooned with garlands of plastic flowers. His four arms were brandishing weapons and sweets, and he danced upon a lotus. The amber and red lights, the tinsel medallions, the rainbow colours on the rims and bumpers should have clashed in their excess, but the impossible bus looked fantastic. As I found my seat back on the bus, I saw my little friend, now awake, and I flashed her a smile. I knew she did not recognize me, but she smiled shyly.

I stirred, I did not know from how long a sleep, but we must have come down the pass because the cool mountain air had been replaced by a damp heat. The quiet of the night journey that had accompanied the noise of the bus had been replaced by rhythmic *bhajans* that were blaring from tiny speakers mounted in the bus—a suitably absurd volume for the tiny speakers that squawked and hissed with distortion. The scene had changed, and a crowd of strangers had mostly replaced the villagers whom I had travelled with, including the girl, and there were some empty seats. In spite of that, men could still be heard on the roof. Babies started crying, and the heat

was making the air feel still in spite of the wind that whipped through the open windows. Though my stream of thought had slowly returned, the strange sense of elasticity of time had remained and I was once again seeing myself from the point of view of a witness, as if in the third person. The bus route was more like a milk truck run than an interstate bus, stopping at every tiny hamlet and sometimes at the edge of the jungle for any man woman or child who flagged it down. Every time the bus stopped moving to pick up or drop off more passengers, the atmosphere inside seemed to get hotter. As I hopped off to help a girl and her little brothers get their luggage onto the roof, I watched myself reach for a hand up and sit down among the arguing and laughing men and boys atop the bus. The bus lurched and swayed and bounced down the switchbacks, teetering on the brink of mighty chasms and bouncing through the hot wind. Ravens and great birds that looked like vultures floated on updrafts, suspended in the silver air above us, and monkeys could be seen and heard adding to the flood of thrilling sensation that was making me delirious with enthusiasm. My previously quiet mind became flooded with all manner of ideas and inspiration as melodies and poetic verses sprang spontaneously to mind and all of my deepest longings and hopes brimmed in this intoxicated state, and still the joyride continued by the hour. I drank greedily from my water bottle as hot air sucked the moisture from me and tugged at my clothes and close cropped hair. The squawky *bhajans* echoed from the rock faces and the hum of the tires blended with the rush of the wind in my ears and the din of the men's exuberant talk.

I reflected that many more than seven hours must have passed. The fall of cool night had forced me off the roof of the bus, and the scattered lights of the outskirts of had given way to the crazy bustle of a Kathmandu city night. All sense of discovery had been replaced by an ardent desire to correctly follow the route that I had mapped in the school back in Dharamshala, and I found the room without incident. An observer in my tiny room with its window wide open to the lights, the smoke, the night smells and the bats of Kathmandu, would have seen a young Canadian man sitting before a photo of his Guru, meditating in the light of a stub of candle wreathed in tendrils of incense smoke. But I was still racing up the mountain pass with an angelic child pressed to my heart. And meditating in a tiny Kathmandu hotel room. And nowhere at all. And everywhere.

Foreword—Kundalini and vibrant flow

At the heart of the pursuit of *Yoga* is the potential for self realization through the advent of a dormant energy known as *kundalini*. Once awakened, this primordial power brings a quiet but blissful detachment to replace the desires and expectations we know as the usual psychic background noise of our existence. This silence is accompanied by a dynamic and intuitive capacity in which one finds oneself receiving insights and creative impulses that can be related to no conscious memory or experience. Kundalini itself is an energy normally sleeping that, when raised, opens one to experiences of the subtle body, an invisible side of one's being. Once the subtle body manifests on the central nervous system in such a case, consciously regulating and balancing one's physical, mental and emotional states can be done as if from a distance, as a witness to the movement of one's own attention, will, and desires.

Kundalini is described in Eastern spiritual and philosophical traditions as a feminine subtle energy that is awakened to balance and enlighten the *Yogic* body—the spiritual body—and ultimately to bestow the state of *Yoga* or Divine Union upon the 'seeker' of truth.¹ On a physical level, its ascension registers on the central nervous system as a cool breeze in the palms, fingertips and above the head. Sometimes these sensations are accompanied by the experience of a silent tide of energy felt within the abdomen or chest which rises and eventually reaches the fontanelle bone at the apex of the head where it descends again in a pleasant shower. This shower is known as *chaitanya*: consciousness (or awareness) of universal soul or spirit,² an emanation from an invisible cosmic source. When triggered, the kundalini energy rises from its abode in the sacrum bone, and ascends the spinal column to the top of the head. When the energy pierces the fontanelle bone at the crown of the head the kundalini passes out of the body closing a circle in which the individual and the all-pervading are united. Yoga is usually defined in contemporary

¹Rai, Umesh Chandra. *Medical Science Enlightened: New Insight into Vibratory Awareness for Holistic Health Care*. London: Life Eternal Trust, 1993. 33

²Waite, Dennis. "Dictionary of Common Sanskrit Spiritual Words." *Advaita Vision*. N.p., 17 Feb. 2014. Web. 21 July 2014. <www.advaita.org.uk>

culture as a union between mind and body, but this is a union between the self and the hidden roots of phenomenal reality, between the individual and the Divine.

According to the model I am proposing, the Yogic artist uses meditation as a creative instrument. This kind of painting practice will generate forms and images that reflect or transmit the inner life and evolution of the artist. In particular, plastic elements like line, rhythm, colour, and space express a subtle knowledge, an "inner" knowledge which is spiritual, or non-phenomenal in nature. The imaginary and symbolic worlds that the silent mind reveals through creative generation appear to have the power to affect both artist and viewer, and this transmission and resulting communication is the substance of all my research—my written and my studio based investigations. The function of mental silence in such an artistic practice is to enable a state I call “vibrant flow”, in which limiting ideas and conditionings are restricted in their capacity to interfere with intuition’s hints from beyond the rational, time bound mind. For myself, the heart of this practice is to demonstrate the potential for the Yoga state to find visual expression in paint. The final result seeks to affect the viewer through creating experiences that hint at something from beyond the world of ordinary phenomenal reality.

The journey presented above of my trip from the Indian border to Kathmandu represents an attempt to make my “inner” experience of kundalini awakening real for the reader. The crossing of the pass in the Himalayas works as a metaphor for the movement of the kundalini crossing the limit of the mind above the limbic area of the brain, but it can also be understood as a fundamental shift of the psyche from a Western to an Eastern orientation. The shift in awareness represented by this crossing demarcates a change in seeing that has characterized my experiences ever since—including the way I make and experience visual art. This change is renewed and reestablished daily through a regular and disciplined meditation practice, a practice that has remained throughout the years between the experiences recounted in the narrative and the time of this writing.

Vibrant flow is how I define the kundalini based studio practice because the spontaneous nature of my studio experience can be expressed as a flow, and the word “vibrant” is a particular reference to the vibrations: the *chaitanya* emanation of cosmic energy. Accessing the kundalini in its awakened state could manifest in many ways, vibrant flow in the studio is just one of those possible manifestations, and it is within the range of these manifestations that the content of this paper will be located. The spontaneous features of an art practice informed by this meditation is the source and the manifest purpose of my art.

To conclude I will reiterate one point about vibrant flow: this energy brings forth states beyond the mind. The Yogic state is mental silence, and whenever the ego or our conditionings make an appearance they are limiting this phenomena. Kundalini solves the riddle of how to silence the mind. Normally thinking about not thinking is just a mental operation chasing its own tail, but true meditation is spontaneous, a side effect of an opening out of our limited consciousness: it is not that one “meditates” because there is no *doing*, one is *in* meditation.

Chapter 1. My Story —the Search

1.1 Recollections

One of my earliest memories of profound awe is centred around watching the stop motion animation Christmas television special *The Little Drummer Boy*. Like so many of the stories that grab children's attention, this one begins with an orphan. The child Aaron has determined to hate all people after desert raiders burned his village and killed his parents. His only companions are a donkey, a camel, a lamb, and a drum Aaron received as a gift from his father. His life is changed forever when he meets three wise men on a desert road. After an arrival in Bethlehem, Aaron's lamb is run down in the street by a Roman carriage. The lamb is injured but alive, and when he approaches the wise kings for help they send him to the Christ child. As gifts are being offered to the Child, Aaron has nothing to offer but to play his drum, at which time we hear the familiar Carol. At the emotional climax of the film, the lamb is miraculously restored to health and the commentator describes what is happening in Aaron's breast as follows:

Aaron's heart was filled with love and joy, and he knew at last that the hate he carried there was wrong - as all hatred will ever be wrong. For more beautiful, more powerful by far than all the eons of cruelty and desolation which had come before was that one tiny, crystalline second of laughter! "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God!"³

When I look within myself for the roots of my life's work I can reach back across many years and touch that moment. We may call it a peak experience to use Abraham Maslov's term.⁴ A Jungian would call it an encounter with the numinous, but as I search my memory I find "one tiny crystalline second" comes closer to describing what I seek in the studio, except that it is a

³*The Little Drummer Boy*. By Romeo Muller. Prod. Rankin/Bass. Perf. Greer Garson, Teddy Eccles, Jose Ferrer. Released by Macmillan Films, 1968. Television.

⁴Schatcter, Daniel *Psychology Second Edition*. New York, NY: Worth, 2013. 487

continuous present —like tiny crystalline seconds which comprise hours. There is a great word for it in in sanskrit: *satchitananda*,; truth-consciousness-bliss.

A few years later, I am perhaps 8 or 9 and cutting out paper projects from my *Richard Scary's Greatest Rainy Day Book Ever*. A feeling of longing mingled with joy overtakes me as I seem to intuit or remember somehow as if through distances in time and space, that some great and sublime work is before me. I feel that it is within my grasp to create something—castles of paper or cardboard, or some walled city or mansion of great symbolic importance. As I continue, absorbed in my handicrafts, I feel joy fading, and the transcendence of time and space is slipping away. Before I can put my finger on what it was that I wanted to create, I return to being an ordinary boy only making ordinary paper crafts cut out from an activity book, and the feeling is of a heavenly dream bleeding into the everyday reality upon waking. I even recall that occasion triggering a memory of a still earlier castle building dream from our home in London, before I was in school.

Peak experiences are transient moments of self-actualization⁵. If we imagine such episodes stretching out we can conceive what sustained access to kundalini represents. So vibrant flow could also be defined as a sustained experience of self-actualization realized during episodes of creative activity.

1.2 Self Realization as a Visual Experience

I suspect it began with the visual experience of the natural world, but my earliest memories of a transcendent vision relate to looking at pictures of art. The earlier experiences I just related were tied to my creative capacity, and in the case of the animated film, a great part of its fascination over me was due to the fact that I could see that these objects, (the stop motion puppets), were created by hand. As an adolescent I had already developed a creative identity tied to a painting

⁵Maslow, Abraham H. *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*. New York: Viking, 1971. 48

and drawing practice. There was a thirst for richness and complexity in paint that was awakened in me by experiences with certain painters, Rembrandt, Van Gogh and Monet in particular, but many individual works by countless other artists evoked a similar response. These experiences awakened two seemingly opposite impulses: one was to endeavour to reflect some of the complexity and fascination of the natural world—in particular colour and pattern. The other impulse was to produce something “inner” something of “spirit” rather than of matter. This spiritual atmosphere was a quality that the above mentioned artists best works were steeped in, a complexity and richness that was not a product of careful and minute “copying” of the natural world. Both impulses were about painting the splendour and glory of visual reality without remaining on the surface of that reality. In my adolescence, imagination and the complexity of the natural world were still integrated, but by the end of high school I had, for better or for worse, “put away childish things” to begin the serious study of painting the world of the five senses. It was to the visual world —both natural and painted, that I had learned to search for experiences of transcendence.

As a figurative painter, through my own discoveries, through carefully copying and studying the old masters, and eventually through instruction, I developed a classical academic painting practice. Along the way I had been introduced to the academic methods of the French and Italian Ateliers of the 18th and 19th centuries at the Angel Academy in Toronto. About 3 years into this traditional development in 1994, I began my first serious non-objective painting experiments, and I have been developing a body of work through both approaches ever since. The dichotomy that would manifest as two literally separate painting practices in 1994 represents a paradox that had begun to develop within me much earlier: the understanding that one must attend to objective appearance as well the invisible to make art which is truly real, and that learning to perfectly model mundane visual experience was a key to giving the hand keys to expressing the invisible. As becoming the Atma is a process of integration, this *Yin* and *Yang* of inner and outer experience come full circle as part of one progression.

Chapter 1.3 Setting Out in Opposite directions for the Same Destination

I considered that breaking through surface reality as an experience must accompany the artistic awakening or insight I craved. I saw that if there was an artistic source or subject beyond matter, it must be immaterial. Before this seeking led to advanced experiments and investigations in Zen meditation, Yoga, ancient scriptures, religion, mythology etc., I experienced a profound split in my painting practice. Now, 19 years later, when viewed through the lens of my current painting and mediation practices, it seems reasonable to conclude that I was looking for a way to transcend the phenomenal world through opposite directions. One strategy was looking at it for harmonies and beauties that could be read as clues to an infinite source. The other strategy was to turn away from the phenomenal reality to look for a non-phenomenal world in abstract colour and pattern. In simple terms, this was splitting my imagery into two categories of works: one that tried to reproduce in the fullest possible intensity the beautiful experience of the phenomenal world around me, the other a purely intuitive image-making that contained no effort to represent the world of the senses at all.

1.4 When Inner Images are Paint Images

A visit to the Museum of Modern Art in 1994 introduced me to Chilean painter Roberto Matta. Matta is generally classified as a surrealist, but what I saw in the work was an attempt to apply layers of transparency and translucency to spontaneous imagery that suggested non-objective biomorphic forms neither figurative nor strictly symbolic. This complexity of plastic elements and richness of organic form and colour is evident in many of Max Ernst's paintings as well, but unlike Matta, Ernst generates these qualities through developing *grattage*, *frottage*, and *decalcomania* painting methods. *Grattage* and *frottage* involve painting with textured surfaces under the canvas which transfer imagery through applying paint on or scraping it off in ways that



fig. 1. Roberto Matta, *Listen to Living*, 1941, Oil on Canvas

trace the textures underneath. Even before I heard of the term *decalcomania*, I could see that Ernst was using some method of pressing two surfaces together with paint between them, then peeling apart to create fractal-like patterns. His “City” series in the 1930s, and many of his



fig 2. Max Ernst, *Europe After the Rain II*, 1942, Oil on Panel



fig 3. *Europe After the Rain II* (detail)

American series of the 1940s exploit these technical developments. Though Ernst was generating the kind of mysterious and complex patterns and forms I would eventually seek to create in my own work, Matta was generating his own biomorphic complexity and richness without using any kind of transfer or other physical type of effect—by that I mean the source of the complexity was his own hand so to speak. Matta was using oil paint in ways it had been evolved to be used before the modern era, taking much more advantage of the extraordinary range of visual and tactile effects the medium can produce. I recognized that I didn't share many of the thematic interests of these artists, but I saw glimpses of a paint language in which the visual richness of the masters did not have to be discarded along with their institutions, politics, religious conditionings, etc. I felt that Matta in particular represented the possibility of a new, fully modern approach to content and process that didn't require abandoning the range of plastic effects of European oil painting tradition.

Consider how the materials, methods, and techniques of the classical academic painter evolved as a representational language: striving to represent nature is what demanded the innovations in technique that oil painters adapted. The lived visual experience of, for example, the skin of a peach or the way a mountain looks from a great distance provide an infinite field of endeavour and technical challenge. So one question for the nonobjective painter is: in the struggle for excellence of resolution, what does the artist fight to represent when there is no objective subject?

Everything vanishes around me, and works are born as if out of the void. Ripe, graphic fruits fall off. My hand has become the obedient instrument of a remote will.⁶

The artist may fight to represent something that is only to be found in the void. Paul Klee did not mention how he compelled the ripe fruit to manifest, but in my case the road to a non-objective content was reached in part through a representational discipline. Just as the the glory of the physical world contains hints about a world of the spirit behind its surface, developing the representational painters skill set unfolded a spiritual painting practice to me. It seems to me that to maintain the integrity of a truly spontaneous content while reintroducing the rich spectrum of colours, media, techniques and procedures of the premodern painter would be a fine challenge for the non-objective artist.

I did not set out to integrate my representational skills into a nonobjective practice. It just happened that in moments of creative play I started mixing the kinds of glazes and other translucent layers that I had been developing for my figurative works and applied them in experimental ways. Sometimes I would take preparations I had prepared for a portrait or a landscape painting and applied them to non-objective pieces as an impulse of the moment. It happened that once I had achieved a level of visual impact in the figurative work, I was no longer satisfied with less in the non-objective works. And so it happens that, quite naturally the nonobjective work came to

⁶Klee, Paul, and Félix Klee. *The Diaries of Paul Klee 1898-1918*. Berkeley: U of California, 1968. 387

draw upon a more or less full spectrum of classical academic techniques and processes. To some extent the paint directed its own content.

But the idea itself must always bow to the needs and demands of the material in which it is to be cast. The painter who stands before an empty canvas must think in terms of paint. If he is just beginning in the use of paint, the way may be extremely difficult for him because he may not yet have established a complete rapport with his medium. He does not yet know what it can do, and what it cannot do. He has not yet discovered that paint has a power by itself and in itself—or where that power lies or how it relates to him. For with the practiced painter it is that relationship which counts; his inner images are paint images, as those of the poet are no doubt metrical word images and those of the musician tonal images.⁷

In the above quote, Ben Shahn speaks to both of these roads to content: the paint has a power by itself and of itself, but the rapport with his medium that allows this power to manifest is born of the technical mastery. For me the secret to taking advantage of the power that paint has “by itself and in itself” was about seeing, a seeing without the mind that meditation and Yoga would introduce me to. But before I would reach that breakthrough in *how* to paint, I would receive a major clue about *what* to paint.

1.5 Clues about Infinity

Somehow or other I understood that it was about a state, an experience, a flow. I had seen glimpses of it in my own practice, even as an adolescent, but I knew that it was to be a life’s work that I would have to unfold over time, and not something I could set out to “do”. It would begin with mastery over media, especially colour, as I had seen Monet and Titian in particular evoke a transcendent atmosphere or reality through colour and a kind of fracturing of space or shape. I realized that it is a quest, and that university was not the fulfillment of that quest. Sometimes in the later years of my undergraduate degree, I felt that a painting was on the right track one day, then a day later I would see the same work and re-

⁷Shahn, Ben. *The Shape of Content*: New York, Random House.1957 pg.57

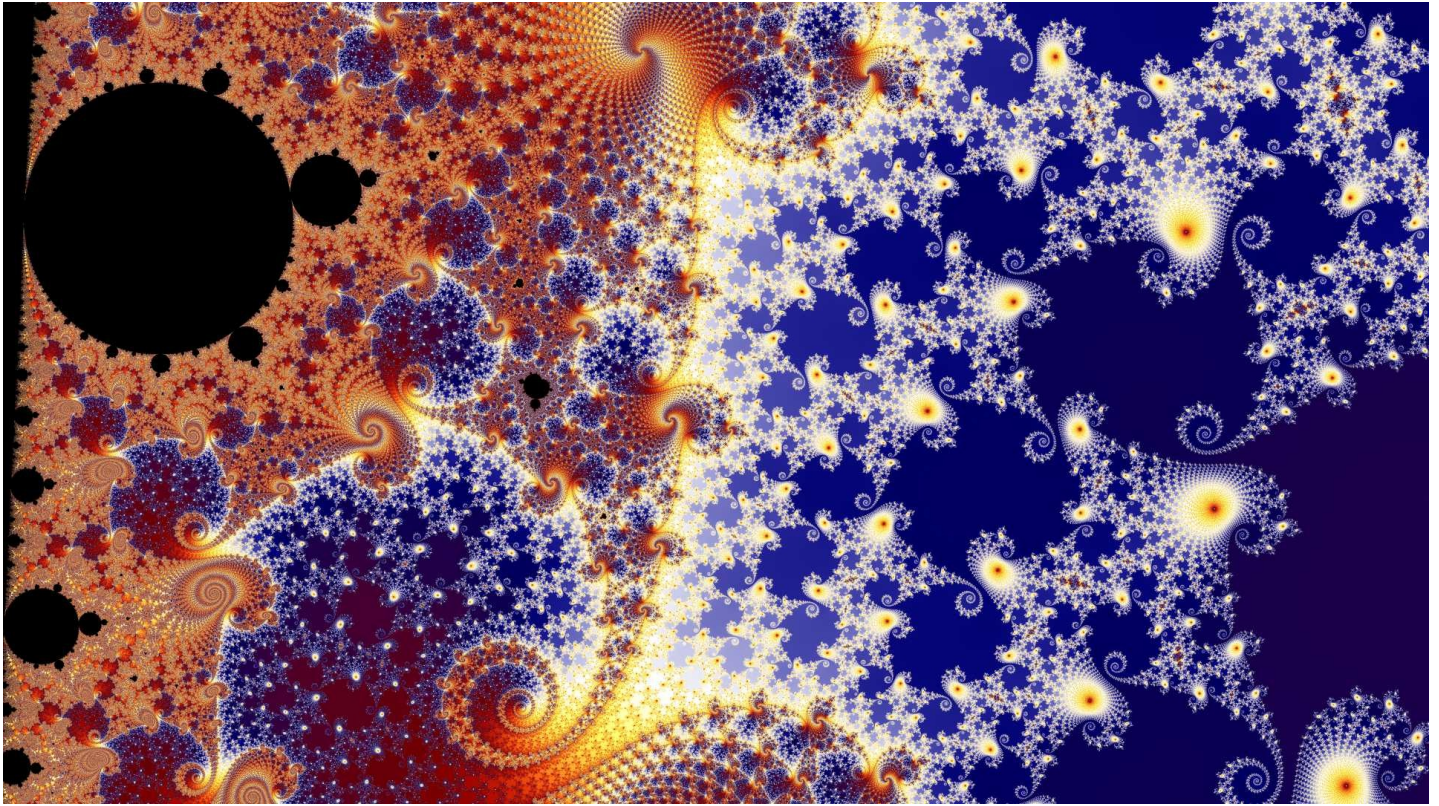
alize that it was insubstantial. I induced perceptive and cognitive distortions through psychoactive drugs in my quest to see colour

fig 4. Jan Thor *Mandelbrot set*, 2010, Digital Image

and pattern beneath the surface of mundane reality, but hallucinations turned out to be a dead end. Though beautiful, amplifying the rhythms patterns, colours, and shapes of nature through chemicals turned out to be another variety of surface and did not bring me closer to an artistic vision. In fact I saw that this kind of escapism would actually blunt the instrument of my imagination over time. The risks of “experimenting” with consciousness did not appear serious at the time, though in retrospect that view seems naïve in the extreme—in any case it was ultimately wasteful and unproductive.

Reading Eastern philosophy, Zen and Taoist philosophies in particular presented me with the idea that a transcendent or visionary reality was in fact very close to “ordinary” consciousness, though the Eastern mystic would be quick to point out that very close was at the same time almost impossibly far. It appealed to my sensibility and my experience that a thin veil separated us from ultimate reality. In the natural world, especially where earth, rock, light and air were intermingled such as at the shore of a tumultuous sea or at a point high above a panorama of great power and splendour, I could intuit that I was just barely “missing” something. And the ineffable character of the experiences in nature, and sometimes experiences with animals, children, and babies, was something above the sum of the input of my 5 senses. By the time I reached adulthood it became conscious that my artistic development would be founded upon a spiritual ascent towards awakening or an awakening to a path of spiritual ascent.

In the fall of 1994 Rik Brezina, a theoretical physicist and friend of mine from University of Waterloo, introduced me to Mandelbrot set images and the mathematics behind them. The images begin with a set of numbers, (the Mandelbrot set), which when represented on the complex plane make up a mathematical object whose boundary is an infinitely detailed, extraordinarily beautiful and organic looking shape.



Complex numbers are applied to a particular mathematical operation, ($z = z^2 + c$). Through iterations of the operation, (applying a point to the equation, then taking the result and putting it back into the equation, over and over) some numbers tend toward infinity, and some do not. The question of whether or not the numbers tend toward infinity, and how quickly, is used to determine which colour to assign to each point in a computer generated image. In short, a simple operation, through countless iterations, produces an image of theoretically infinite complexity, and is “fractal” in appearance—that is, it is complex and self-similar though never identical at any scale to infinity. What was striking about these images on an intuitive level, was what I call “fractal shape”. Benoit Mandelbrot, the mathematician for whom the set is named categorized these kind of self-similar geometrical features with their characteristic roughness “fractals”.

It was eye opening to see the kind of shape or boundary that is visible in a Mandelbrot set image, and once my eye was opened to this phenomena, I saw the world around me with different eyes. Mathematician Ralph Abraham describes being introduced to the Mandelbrot set images:

the blinders came off and people could see forms that were always there, but formerly were invisible⁸

It was just this way with myself, nature's fractal geometry was everywhere I looked, the clouds, the trees, the sky, snow, water, everywhere. A similar change in my awareness occurred the first time Greg Murphy, a sessional instructor at University of Waterloo Fine Arts in 1991 introduced the idea of colour of light. I had often noticed how at dawn or dusk the reflected colours of sun and shadow on objects became more pronounced, but after professor Murphy's lectures, I saw colour of light absolutely everywhere—indoors, outdoors, at any time or place. And so it was with fractals: then as now, I saw them everywhere and all the time, just as one sees colours, textures or form—sometimes unconscious, but always present to me.

In the case of the fractal signature stamped on natural phenomena, there are a few major features one can look for. This subject is better suited to a slide lecture rather than a written text, but one who goes exploring computer generated fractals, (especially Mandelbrot set images), or one who looks for fractals in the natural world will be able to find recurrent features. They include motifs that recall shorelines, spirals, mandala-type radial patterns, bifurcating lines and patterns, branches, branching channels and rivers, as well as tendrils such as one sees with wisps of smoke or climbing vines. The characteristic paradox of an ordered yet richly organic patterning can be seen in many human creative arts as well. Islamic ornamentation, Indian wood block and woven textiles, Persian rugs and illuminated texts, Celtic ornamentation, and many many more. Though many categories of fractal stamps or signatures are evident in my paintings, I will limit this discussion to looking for something I call "fractal shape".

A mountain or a chain of mountains in silhouette is an example of what I call a fractal shape. At twilight when a mountain's profile is dark against the sky, the character of that boundary be-

⁸Ralph Abraham, "Benoit Mandelbrot - Hunting the Hidden Dimension - Nova", YouTube, 11 January 2011. Web. 03 May 2013.

tween land and sky contains endless layers, we could even say iterations, of information. For example, someone well acquainted with mountains, say a geologist who specializes in such features, could glean a great deal of information from such a boundary. Even at a great distance one may roughly identify the geological era of the mountains, the kind of rock, or identify whether we were looking at fold mountains, block mountains, or volcanic mountains, etc. How can a boundary or the line that traces such a boundary contain so much information? It is in the degree of the line's self similarity,—what Mandelbrot called “roughness”. This self similarity, or fractal complexity is a density of content in a line or shape. But we can read such information as gesture, which is how the geologist can recognize the profile of a particular formation with a glance. He or she does not need to look into a telescope to spot the smaller and smaller forms because self similarity, the fractal situation, is a signature that can be read at many scales. Another example is a cloud. Even at a great distance the shape of a cloud can provide someone who knows what to look for with a great deal of informational richness. The height, the density, its classification, how it was formed, what kind of air pressure is associated with it etc., can be identified. Even if we were to trace the cloud's silhouette with a line, such a line could provide a meteorologist with this kind of detailed information. So fractal shape indicates a shape and/or line which is remarkably rich in character and meaning. Another simple way of describing it is as “organic”. This serves well as the presence of a fractal signature is shared among all organic material. To appear organic is to appear fractal.

Geometry will make you see everything differently. There is a danger in reading further. You risk the loss of your childhood vision of clouds, forests, flowers, galaxies, leaves, feathers, rocks, mountains, torrents of water, carpet, bricks, and much else besides. Never again will your interpretation of these things be quite the same.⁹

In my case, it feels more like a fulfillment of childhood vision than a loss, but the scale of this shift in seeing as described above is consistent with my case.

⁹ Michael F. Barnsley *Fractals are Everywhere*, 2001

So how does a spontaneous painting practice produce these rich gestural shapes and lines? Just as the wealth of information contained in the contour line of a mountain is available at a thoughtless glance to the geologist, the wealth of sensitivity and awareness that informs the sensorimotor action of a practiced artist's fingertips, eyes and wrist is there to record the subtlest promptings of intuition and "feel". If the mind is truly at rest, it is like a mirror-calm on a lake which enables a vivid and clear reflection of the sky above. The inner life can be reflected in an artist's expression when their thinking, reacting mind does not trouble the surface of their consciousness. The advantage of a sustained meditation state is that a detailed study of the invisible inner life can be patiently transmitted. In my experience, the more time the non-objective paintings are allowed to patiently emerged, the more fractal they become in appearance. It is a fanciful idea, but it could nonetheless be true that the reason why such a painting is fractal in appearance is because as a Yogic artist, I am able to reflect the same patient and subtle essence that takes shape in nature's unhurried and meditative productions. These will always be poetic musings as the more prosaic side to aesthetics is left behind when we leave behind words.

Chapter 2. Actions Speak Louder than Words

2.1 Reading Between the Lines

When people unaccustomed to seeing, writing, or talking about contemporary art look at my paintings and I ask them for their impressions, they often opt out by saying something along the lines of “oh, I don’t know anything about art”. I’m always quick to point out that I hope my paintings are best received in mental silence, and that “not knowing about art” is the ideal circumstance for getting the experience I am after. I know for myself that when I look at effective non-objective paintings without thought or reaction they start to come to life with spatial effects and rhythms, forms and relationships. I have felt a comparable kind of effect when listening to music: When I stop the chatter of my inner dialogue and actually listen, good music will take on spacial dimensions, textures, a kind of poetic language. And best of all is when these subtler effects are not arbitrary, but seem to be coordinated by the elements in the work according to an internal logic or force of inspired direction. It is my experience that effective paintings “do” something, and I had always thought that the less knowledge and theory a viewer has to apply to the situation, the less opportunity they will have to impair access to that effect. This paper is making the case that there is a poetic language through which paintings can communicate spiritual messages and experiences, and that this transmission is not something paintings signify or represent, it is something they do. This impression is part of the reason why I prefer not to rely on artist’s statements. Doing rather than saying as a fundamental of the art experience has led me to suspect some supporting texts of being guilty of seeking explanations for artworks that were not communicating loudly enough on their own terms. I’m speaking here of a text that must be referred to when viewers can make no sense of work as it stands alone.

But language can fulfill a poetic purpose that enriches rather than excuses. Though I still maintain that painting, and non-objective painting in particular, is at its best when it speaks clearly in a language beyond sign, metaphor, or other stand-in for a verbal or rational communication, I believe it is nonetheless within our power to use written language to represent something of what non-objective painting does.

Once while driving and listening to BBC radio 2, an announcer was introducing a classical piece by sharing biographical information about the composer: It's the summer of 1818, and the composer is spending the summer in a château as the private instructor to the daughters of an Austrian Count. This awkward, diminutive young man has been plucked from the daily grind and doldrums of teaching music students and has received a well paid position with light duties and happy hours given to composition in comfort and peace. There is a distinctive horn call that can be heard echoing throughout the estate's extensive park whenever the Count is out on a hunt, and the radio announcer encouraged me to listen for its refrain during the music that was to follow. The music began and I experienced it all: summer afternoon sunshine played on the limestone sill of the composers study, the barking of the hounds echoed around the park and its green hills. When I heard the horn call motif, this tired old classic was suddenly no longer familiar to me. I was hearing it for the first time, the announcer's brief introduction had breathed extraordinary life into the work. I felt something stir within me and felt myself carried through the moods, movements and textures of the piece like a leaf on a breeze. My point is that words have a poetic capacity. Though the details of the composers biography were not delivered in poetic language, they were sufficient to put me in touch with artist's spirit; to hear the piece at the roots of the composers experience rather than as mere melody, harmony and rhythm. The piece had not changed, the words the announcer spoke changed me. I considered afterward the way art is not experienced in a vacuum; our memories, experiences and associations sensitize our consciousness to life.

Rewarding and rich access to the world of our senses need not be understood as intellectualization of the world, it is an integrated physical, mental, and emotional experience. In his work on perception, *Varieties of Presence*, Alva Noë summed up his theory about the way skillful perception give us access to the world as follows:

This book is about presence, and the idea that presence is achieved. Consciousness is not something that happens in us, it is something we make. Making requires, in addition to motivation, knowledge and skill, a whole

situation in which we happen to find ourselves. It requires something like grace.¹⁰

The preamble about Schubert didn't provide me with music theory to guide a surface reading of the piece, it provided me with graceful access—I was in the narrative waiting for the circumstances of the summer of 1818 to come alive, I wanted the way the bugle call stirred the composer to reach me across time. Years of listening to music, learning music theory, playing piano, all these things were part of my skillful access to that experience, but in the end words were there to enable me to receive access, to receive affect. The deepening of my experience was a case of words nudging my mind into poetic places between the lines.

2.2 Allan Watts

In an audio recording likely made at the American Academy of Asian Studies where he was an instructor between 1951 and 1957, Allan Watts prefaces his discussion on “emptiness” with a sketch of the Buddhist conception of language.

And so by getting you enchanted with words you don't notice what is going on. In the same way when people hypnotize you—it's very difficult to hypnotize people without talking to them, but very easy if you talk, and you can hypnotize people in all kinds of ways that don't involve the standard routines; that is to say that the standard routines are making people stare at a bright object, or some revolving disk, or tricks of this kind. But you can induce hypnosis just with words. And they don't even know they are being hypnotized. So, in a way then, it is all philosophical problems, and all religious problems are problems of language. Because if you don't use words, you don't have any problems.¹¹

This gives some clues about the enthusiasm that I, or in a previous generation, artists like John Cage, Mark Tobey or Ibram Lassaw felt about discovering “silence” or “emptiness” in the Zen sense of those words; if there is a spiritual or philosophical approach that can help break the spell

¹⁰Noë, Alva. *Varieties of Presence*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2012.

¹¹*Allan Watts on Emptiness*. Perf. Allan Watts. *YouTube*. N.p., 04 Jan. 2013. Web. 14 Feb. 2014. <<http://youtu.be/joasij3d-F0>>.

of words by disconnecting or circumventing the mind, then the possibility for an immediate or unmediated expression arrives. This may be especially important with visual art, as images in the form of the written and printed word have replaced spoken word as the primary carrier of modern cultural heritage. Until the transformations of the late 19th century, paintings in the West were by and large a collection of signs: metaphors, symbols and narrative conventions could be read like a text. So the impulse to create completely non-objective images—paintings that cannot be “read” so to speak—creates a need for a non-literal “content”. If we follow Watts a little further, he introduces some imagery that may shed light on how Zen *seeing* might be distinguishable from a more codified visual consciousness:

Because if you don't use words, you don't have any problems. And that's a most extraordinary thing: you think you see that you've got words to help solve your problems, so that you can communicate with each other about things and help each other out, and so on, that's true —because to a certain extent words do solve problems like “please pass me the salt” and “would you light the fire for me” and “lets go for for a walk”, shall we go hunting today”, etc. All these things can be solved by words. But then when you start getting really deeply involved in words, what you do is this: you assign words to various aspects of experience, but the thing is, you wouldn't know what an aspect was unless you had words.

The world, it is true, we say is differentiated. Because we see different shapes, different colours, and different motions, and we assign words to these differentiations, and so come to believe that the differentiations in the world are really different. But actually, when you see a cloud, it's true the cloud has got lots of bumps on it. Now the question arises, “how many bumps does the cloud have, and are these bumps different from the cloud or the same as the cloud?” Well that's an asinine question because that's only a question about how you are going to define it. It isn't a question about the cloud. And so in exactly the same way as a cloud is constantly moving and changing,—or watch some cigarette smoke in the air, this is a lovely, weaving pattern, watch it in a beam of sunlight, and its intricate like a marvellous moorish arabesque. But is each line of smoke a thing? is it a separate event? Now you see how the buddhists see the world, as a weaving of smoke—that everything is in a state of flux or

flow. And so the differentiation of things cannot hold except as a purely abstract and intellectual construct.¹²

Could we look at art as a “weaving of smoke”? Perhaps this “flux or flow” could find expression in a visual aesthetic. Visually speaking, clouds and tendrils of smoke are fractal in appearance and shape, and flows and currents in nature are fractal shapes. We will see how for artists Mark Tobey and John Cage, transcending their literal interpretations of visual experience included visions of ambient patterns and imagery.

2.3 Nothing and Everything

Nancy Wilson Ross, lecturer on Zen at Seattle’s Cornish School, gave a talk in 1938 *Zen and Dada*. Composer John Cage was among the students whom Ross contacted. She put forward the idea that the artist can act as a prophet seeing ahead of the “mass mind” of his or her era. Her view placed the artist as part of a collective development. According to Ross, this development followed two distinct forms: one informed by technology and science, the other side being the subjective: “intuition, fantasy, vision, and dreams”.¹³ According to Ross, Zen sensibilities were expressed through this intuitive side and could be identified in the work of Klee, Chagall, de Chirico, Ernst, and others.¹⁴ This relating of intuitive and spontaneous approaches to art with Zen was a message that Cage would help bring to his American peers. Cage was also introduced to the writings on Zen of D.T. Suzuki. Turning to non-literal or non-rational methods of expression was compatible to the negation of words Suzuki presented in his writings. In *Everything and Nothing* Ellen Pearlman narrates how Ross compared D.T. Suzuki’s anecdotes and Zen parables to Dadaism. Among other themes Cage would have been introduced to was the Zen influence on Japanese arts such as the tea ceremony, tea house gardens, haiku, and the aesthetics of the room.

¹²*Allan Watts on Emptiness*. Perf. Allan Watts. N.p., 04 Jan. 2013. Web. 14 Feb. 2014.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

She discussed the Japanese aesthetics of the room or “the abode of vacancy” with emphasis on the “inner” rather than outer space. A Japanese room remained as empty as possible and was capable of fulfilling all purposes...¹⁵

It's not hard to imagine that the architectural and visual art manifestations of a Zen sensibility could have been adapted to musical applications in Cage's imagination. His “silent” composition 4:33 could be considered the audio corollary to the “abode of vacancy”. The Cornish school in Seattle with its theatre and art gallery would become a home to many avant-garde experiments from 1939 onwards with Cage himself mounting four shows there. These experiments included the work of Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky and Mark Tobey.¹⁶ Pearlman recounts an episode in which Tobey accompanied Cage to a Japanese restaurant in downtown Seattle. Tobey had recently studied Chinese brush painting in Shanghai and eventually lived as a monk in Japan at the Enpuku-ji Rinzai Zen monastery, experiences that would eventually inform his “white writing” paintings.

Cage and Xenia accompanied Tobey to a Japanese restaurant in downtown Seattle. He made them stop every few feet to point out a beautiful object, spot, shadow, or arrangement of disparate visual elements. Attending Tobey's art opening, Cage noticed for the first time the setting sun reflecting on white surfaces and the subtle changes of light. He saw that the flat surfaces were not truly flat, but cracked and flaked with many fissures. Tobey had opened up Cage's eyes to the work around him.¹⁷

These changes no doubt inform the Zen themed lectures in the late 1940s and 50s at The Club in New York including Cage's presentation *Lecture on Something and Nothing* in February of 1951. When I look at the fractal content of Tobey's “white writing” paintings, it is clear that the gestur-

¹⁵Pearlman, Ellen. *Nothing and Everything*. Berkley, CA Evolver Editions, 2012. 35

¹⁶Pearlman, Ellen. *Nothing and Everything*. Berkley, CA Evolver Editions, 2012. 38

¹⁷ Ibid.

al content of his earlier experiments in Chinese brush paintings were spun into more complex and self generating forms, as I do in my own painted works.

More importantly for me, the anecdote above reveals that Zen seeing for Tobey, and seemingly for Cage as well, involved seeing ambient organic patterning, i.e., fractals. Tobey opened Cage's eyes to the ambient patterns and features within "flat surfaces". The opened eyes that can perceive cracks, flakes and fissures is a parallel to ambient music that opened ears can hear in an otherwise "silent" concert hall. Music halls are not silent any more than walls are flat. In my experience, seeing and listening are inseparable parts of meditation, and a meditation that informs a musical or visual art practice is clearly present in Cage's and Tobey's legacies to the American avant-garde. In New York's *The Club*, whose members and visitors included New York artists such as Ad Reinhardt, Philip Pavia, Ibram Lassaw, Willem de Kooning, hosted lectures on Zen by D.T. Suzuki and others. Through *The Club*, Zen and the avant-garde continued their symbiotic development that had begun at the Cornish School.

However I may have been influenced by the American school and however much I may admire and enjoy their work, my exposure to New York school artists such as Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning and others didn't inspire me to imitate their visual vocabulary. What is of interest here is the connection, particularly in the cases of John Cage and Mark Tobey, between a Zen experience of consciousness and an artistic communication generated out of a void. As a Buddhist, I might say communication generated out of THE void. The particular feature in these cases is of perception itself suggesting an inherent, ambient poetic content. Tobey's fractal imagery in his white writing series is significant. And the anecdote describing their shared experience of a heightened perception of visual beauty and complexity in seemingly mundane imagery and sound is significant. This is a case of a Western artist seeking and finding a new strategy for generating content through mental silence. This content can be presented as spiritual not only in light of Zen Buddhism's transcendental aims, but also as it represents an artistic practice in which cultural, political, and other materialistic tags are left behind.

2.4 Zen Brush/No Mind

Painter Francis Bacon (1809-1992) sometimes remarked that his favourite mark on the canvas was the first, and that his approach to art was to try to have each subsequent mark contain the energy and spontaneity of the first. What quality can the first brushstroke have before anything is represented, in an empty field? I would suggest that it is the same quality of the Zen brush stroke: “empty paper, blank mind”. I’m suggesting that the “no mind” state is what Bacon sought as his creative engine—the source beyond the world of the five senses. The monks of the Zen religion believed that this quality would only appear in the artwork of an artist who had personally experienced the state of Zen, the “zero”, or emptiness in which one is said to touch on absolute reality. As stated in Jean Luc Marion’s *The Crossing of the Visible*:

The more the invisible is increased, [in the painted image] the more the visible is deepened. With the painting, the painter, like an alchemist, makes visible what without him would have remained definitively invisible.¹⁸

Though negation of the mind is stressed in Zen Buddhism, it is a arguably a feature in all mystic traditions. The mystical experience of the Divine is characterized by a revelation or experience of insight which is direct and unmediated by ideologies or conditioned modes of worship. This is just another way of saying that there are no words that can do credit to the experience of mystical insight. What the Buddhist calls *satori*, (can be translated as enlightenment or the crossing of the boundary of enlightenment) the Indian seer would describe as *moksha* (final liberation). In both cases, the limit that is crossed is the ego, the thinking mind. But the mind has difficulty conceptualizing a state free from the mind. It is also categorized as non-duality. If we return to Allan Watts’ description above it may help to recall:

...we assign words to these differentiations, and so come to believe that the differentiations in the world are really different. But actually, when you see a cloud, it’s true the cloud has got lots of bumps on it. Now the questions arises, “how many bumps does the cloud have, and are these bumps different from the cloud or the same as the cloud?” Well that’s an

¹⁸Marion, Jean-Luc. *The Crossing of the Visible*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 25

asinine questions because that's only a question about how you are going to define it. It isn't a question about the cloud.

The state of no questions and no problems is also known as the *Sahaja* state.

2.5 Becoming the Atma

Sahaja state can be defined with reference to the *Atma*. In the word Sahaja, the *sa* is “with” the *haj* is “born”: “born with you”, or “innate” is its nature, this is the foundation of becoming the Atma. Atma is indeed primordial, and becoming the Atma is becoming what we already are. The sun remains the sun even when its effects are concealed by clouds, and likewise the Atma is present always whatever obstacles and limitations temporarily prevent us from feeling its presence. We can translate Atma as “the spirit”, meaning the primordial spirit, though this word is too vague. Atma is generally mis-translated as “soul”, and though soul can mean many things in English, it has a very specific meaning for the subtle body, and it is something separate and distinct from Atma. In the Yogic body, soul is a sheath that carries the subtle body, the essence that survives the body and whose existence is located beyond the limits of our temporal existence. Contained within this sheath, and at the heart of the subtle body is a reflector, which when enlightened through kundalini and made clean through balance, spiritual disciplines and observances can connect the limited self with the primordial Self, or in the language of Indian philosophy, to connect the Atma with the Paramatma.

Becoming the Atma is a happening which could be described as Paramatma (the all-pervading spirit of which Atma is part and parcel) being made manifest through the provision of a reflection point within the subtle body. This reflection is experienced within the body and consciousness and such a one truly *becomes* the Atma. This is a union between the individual and the infinite—as good a translation for the word “Yoga” as I know of.

If we consider someone blind from birth, the word “light” may have a myriad of significations, meanings and associations. All such understanding would be individual and to some ex-

tent separate from the associations shared by other people, and so it is with Atma. If through some operation or miracle sight could be given to the blind person, though it would take time, some sense would be made of the new sensory experiences. A universal—one could say “ultimate”—picture of what light is, could eventually be experienced and shared with humankind. So it is with Atma, its light is discovered through becoming. My art is founded on the pursuit of my becoming the Atma, and its goal is ultimately to facilitate such a happening in the viewer.

Chapter 3. India and Sahaja Awakening

3.1 Sahaja Yoga

It is important to clarify that kundalini awakening is the Buddhist's *satori* in the language of Sahaja Yoga. These distinctions are cultural and not differences in the real sense. I would go so far as to say with William Blake that "all religions are one". If anyone insisted on maintaining a fundamental difference between Zen and Sahaja conceptions of self-realization, I would point them to the following verses from eighth century Sahajiya Buddhist monk *Saraha*:

In Sahaja there is no duality; it is perfect like the sky.
The intuition of this ultimate truth destroys all attachment and it shines
through the darkness of attachment like a full moon in the night.
Sahaja cannot be heard with the ears neither can it be seen with the eyes;
It is not affected by air nor burned by fire;
It is not wet in intense rain, it neither increases nor decreases,
It neither exists nor does it die out with the decay of the body;
The Sahaja bliss is only oneness of emotions —it is oneness in all.
Our mind and the vital wind are unsteady like the horse;
But in Sahaja-nature both of them remain steady.
When the mind thus ceases to function and all other ties are torn aside, all
the differences in the nature of things vanish; and at that time there is nei-
ther the Brahmin nor the Sudra.¹⁹

If I am to add anything worthwhile to this description of the experience of Sahaja Yoga, it will be through painting not through poetry, so I will let this description stand as my own best presentation of its nature. My Guru, the master behind the modern incarnation of the Sahaja path *Sahaja Yoga* was, and remains Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi. Though I first spoke to and received personal guidance from Shri Mataji in Canada, it was when she invited me to the International Sahaja Public School in Dharamshala India to live and teach art, that I consolidated my self-realization and learned to employ it in my art. This was a truly immersive experience where meditation and

¹⁹Noyce, John. *Sahaja Studies*. Melbourne: John Noyce, 2013. Print. 21-22

collective ascent where shared experiences, and the atmosphere of ashram life in the Himalayas was transformative. It is this transformation that I strove to give voice to in the short story at the start of this paper. Just as Mark Tobey's enthusiasm for Chinese brush painting evolved into a complete immersion in the Buddhist culture at Japan's at Enpuku-ji Rinzai Zen monastery, my own experiments in calligraphic mark-making combined with my immersion in Sahaja culture in India informed my own approach. This parallel's a similar interest in brush and ink in my own image generation. By 1997, before my departure for India, my abstracts were like action paintings: oriental in character, and simple in construction. Though they were painted in oils, I formulated a medium from mineral spirits and linseed oil (with cobalt drier) for mixing colours with a weight, fluidity and density similar to ink. At that time processes and effects I had evolved to give portrait subjects depth and verisimilitude in oil were applied to the brushstroke "forms" of the earlier abstract vocabulary.

The technical complexity of an academic oil painting is difficult to resolve with the "blank paper, blank mind" of the Zen brush. This is how the parallel stream of my meditation practice became integrated into my painting practice. As long as the mind is at rest, the same playful spontaneity of the first stroke on the blank canvas can be maintained. In theory, the goal was to allow the peace and bliss I had begun to experience through Sahaja Yoga meditation to manifest. My daily practice of meditation as a way of remaining a spontaneous instrument was the primary way, but often as forms and images emerged from the painting in progress, it became difficult not to react to the images, and try to "take control". One way to prevent this tendency from inhibiting the development of the work was to devise ways to break mental reactions. This included ignoring the inner voice of my reactions whenever it told me I was failing or succeeding. Eventually I found the easiest way was simply not to look when I was painting the fundamental forms which would form the basis for the structure of the subsequent stages of the work. The technique is to load the brush, and then look away, and while silencing the mind begin to paint by touch rather than by sight, using only peripheral vision to keep the brush within the borders of the canvas. This tightrope walk approach was limited, though I still use this method at times.

After India, it was like taking the training wheels off a bicycle, I could just step out into the void, and I have been able to do so ever since—God willing, it will always be so. Years later I tried to describe it in words. While I was living in Bulgaria shortly after the birth of my first daughter, (the year was 2002), I was riding a train alone at night from Bucharest, Romania to Plovdiv, Bulgaria, and I wrote in my journal:

Spontaneous and gestural, the abstract marks are like oriental brush painting in character. Through layers, the fresh feeling of an action painting is expanded into three dimensions. It resembles “Mandelbrot set” images. This application of a slow and rigorous process to enmesh what are essentially a series of spontaneous action paintings, is a way of spinning a complex and harmonious reality out of reflexive mark-making. Ideally each step of the painting is as intuitive as the first few brush-strokes.

It was during that journey, while I was thinking of Indian classical music when it occurred to me that what I was painting were the visual equivalent of a raga, the Indian musical form.

3.2 Raagmala Painting

At the outset of my non-objective painting experiments, I was naturally eager to find cultural or art historical parallels to my non-objective paintings. This quest led to the discovery of the medieval art form of the *raagmala* paintings of India—a discovery that began with Indian musical culture as a whole. My discovery of Indian classical music coincided with my discovery of Sahaja Yoga, and this period of discovery intensified while I was teaching art in India.

Years later, after several years of meditation and appreciation of Indian classical music, my journal records an experience felt during an overnight train ride toward my home in Bulgaria. I was watching the silhouette of the mountains against the stars when a flood of inspiration came to me in which I understood that the abstracts were visual *raagas*. The raagas are the cornerstone of Indian classical music, pieces of music to be performed, as well as the musical form itself. The raga is not played according to a prescribed notation in the strict manner of a western classical piece, it is an interpretation, more like a jazz piece which has a refrain which it elaborates on

through improvisation. But a raaga is much more than that. Each raag has its own ascending and a descending scale, but in the form of a loose melody or theme, generally with a recognizable refrain. The word raaga can be translated as “colour” “tone” or “mood”, but it doesn’t really translate because we have no such special concept in western musical culture. Both raaga as mode and the raaga as the production of the performing artist are said to be an expression of a specific aspect of the divine in the form of sound. The music transmits a subtle knowledge that deepens as the artist develops the raaga during the course of the performance. The greater the artist’s depth, mastery, and subtlety, the deeper the artist and his or her audience are enveloped into the quality or aspect of absolute reality (Brahma) being depicted.

It occurred to me that just as a raaga represents a journey into a specific mood, or tone, of an aspect of absolute reality, so my non-objective paintings could be an emanation from the absolute, each one developing deeper and deeper through the image’s evolution into its particular mood. Even as the raaga has certain broad strokes, or themes that then bifurcate into decorative melodic passages, so the broad themes or movement of the painted strokes seem to divide and subdivide into improvisations of smaller, and gentler touches of line, tone, and light.

Eventually I realized that my “visual raagas” had an antecedent. The raagmala paintings of the Middle Ages, which are still created today in India were visual depictions of a series of musical raagas: the raagmalas (garland of raagas). They were developed through the artist meditating on the particular qualities of a raaga to be able to reproduce the raaga in colours and forms. Some elements of raagmala painting are literal illustrations of the theme of the raaga. For example, a raag Bhairav painting would have a picture of the deity Shri Bhairav. But background elements, colour, tonal composition, and feel, and movement of the paintings were evolved and refined to bring the non objective essence—the “feel” of the raaga to life.

The origin of Indian classical music was said to have been gifted to sages through the medium of celestial sage Narada acting as a representative of the goddess Shri Saraswati Herself, and the subtle knowledge contained in this essential music was created to act on the subtle or energetic

body of the artist and the listener. It is like medicine for the subtle body, or *Yogic* body. The raagas, especially the northern Indian raagas, corresponded to different times of day, seasons of the year, and ultimately to different deities, or aspects of the Divine. In such a case the Divine indicates the absolute formless, changeless source from which all forms and changes emanate. The benefit is felt as the artist or listener has the qualities of the particular raaga awakened in the corresponding energy centres within his or her subtle body bringing balance, enlightenment, and subtle knowledge directly to the inner instrument of his or her awareness. I have found no more accurate picture or model of what I understand the goal of my paintings to be than the story of the raagas. The ideal of a visual raga tells the story of an aspect of the absolute being revealed to the artistic imagination, then transmitted as subtle knowledge to whomever share the artist's vision.

3.3 Microcosms/Macrocosms

When a viewer sees my paintings and comments on them, unless they are a mathematician or scientist, they seldom mention fractals, they generally remark that the paintings look *like* something, and that *something* is almost always a macrocosm or a microcosm. For me, this is a way of saying that the paintings feel “real”. This is especially evident when a scientist, for example, refers to varieties of images I have never seen. My sister Sarah who is an environmental biologist often remarks that my paintings look like computer enhanced satellite images of environmental features that are much larger than a human scale, or that they look like microbiological forms that are much smaller than anything we see at a human scale. In both cases she is referring to imagery and patterns I have never seen.

Why is this perspective on my content placed in the chapter on Sahaja awakening? I suspect this ability to paint images that are no record of anything I have ever seen points to primordial symbols and patterns which are available through the artist's access to the undifferentiated cosmic psyche. In other words, if we can conceive of a Sahaja or a Spiritual reality that is unlimited by time and space, one who paints convincing images from such a place is a kind of “abstract realist”. A further proof of this possibility is as follows: Though

I never *try* to paint fractals, the first time my brother-in-law, (who is a theoretical mathematics professor), saw the non-objective paintings his first remark was: “have you ever seen images of a mathematical object called the Mandelbrot set?” Any mathematician or computer scientist who is aware of how Mandelbrot images are generated can tell you that the complexity of such images would make it impossible to generate such pictures mechanically, “by hand” as it were.

What does reality look like outside of our human scale? If the scale of the observed reality is outside of our frame of reference, we can see images which are “realistic” which do not signify any form or idea we can attach them to. The way in which microcosms and macrocosms remind us of forms, patterns, and features from the natural world at the human scale suggests to me a subtle all-pervading reality which the material world manifests at every scale. Even human scale objects like tree bark in a close cropped photo, might suggest a satellite photo of a mountain range when taken out of context. Or a close cropped picture of the erosion of a creek bed might suggest features on the surface of Jupiter or Saturn that are thousands of miles across. In a 1924 public address Paul Klee suggested the same paradigm to address the question of how to approach or qualify images born of the artist’s imagination:

Isn’t it true that if we only take the relatively small step of glancing into a microscope, we will see images that we would all call fantastic and exaggerated if we happened to see them in a painting without realizing the joke? Mr. X, coming across a reproduction of a microphotograph in a cheap journal, would exclaim indignantly: “Are those supposed to be natural forms? Why the man just doesn’t know how to draw!” Then does the artist have to deal with microscopy? ...Only by way of comparison, only by way of gaining greater scope, not so that he has to be ready to prove his fidelity to nature!²⁰

It appears that the intuitive artist’s eye is specially equipped to recognize these primordial forms and patterns, these features of reality. Just as making live music is mostly about listening, spon-

²⁰Protter, Eric. *Painters on Painting*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1963. 195

taneous painting is mostly about seeing. A “meaningless” mark on a canvas can suggest images to the artist’s imagination, from which more images may be suggested, and for the spontaneous, non-reacting mind, a natural order may evolve which has no reference to the world of ideas, signs, or any phenomenon of the observable world, and yet which appears to be an accurately rendered image of something “real”.

3.4 Fractal Shape

The difference between a fractal and a fractal shape is significant, and my paintings exhibit fractal shape. A painted (or drawn, or hand-printed) fractal shape appears to have fractal complexity, but the feel of self-similarity can be achieved without the multiple scales. For example, Hokusai’s woodblock below has landforms, whitecaps, and vegetation depicted in obvious fractal shapes, but if we looked with a magnifying glass, we would not see self-similarity on smaller scales. It is the same with our mountain silhouette or cloud shape: At great distances, we cannot see the smaller and smaller iterations that characterize clouds and mountains as shapes with fractal boundaries—we don’t need a telescope to know that these are fractal shapes, because even at



fig. 5 Katsushika Hokusai, *The Thirty-Six Views of Mt Fuji*, 1830-32. Woodcut.

one scale, the suggestion of smaller and smaller scales is inherent in the character of the boundary line. So Hokusai's shapes suggest layers of content that he doesn't have to depict in actuality. Fractal shape is a shape with many layers of gestural content. Or we could say that a fractal boundary suggests many scales of gestural content.

For the painter, gesture is applied to all subject matter, even non-objective imagery, but because of our familiarity with the language of human gesture, it is easiest to recognize effective gesture when it is applied to human figures. Gesture can be understood as movement or life that animates a figure -one could say the spirit or "voice" of the figure in body language. Quick drawings are easier to infuse with gesture, but more patient drawings or paintings, especially works which take days or weeks to complete require a depth and breadth of application to the features of gesture throughout the developing stages of the work. It could be compared to the way an orchestral composition maintains an emotional or thematic signature throughout a piece even while the composer tinkers with individual instrumental parts. Underpainting, contours, shapes, rhythms, compositional devices and elements, any of these layers can carry the imprint or echo of the gestural themes.

Why is gesture so fundamental to figure drawing, or to visual art in general? Just as in the case of the silhouette of the mountain or the cloud, even at one scale the suggestion of subtler and subtler layers of information is inherent in the character of the boundary line of a figure. Gesture points toward infinity—such as in the infinite scales a computer generated fractal can (in theory) manifest—as rich gesture is fractal in shape and line, fractal self-similarity points toward countless iterations. The fractal shape suggests self similarity as the contours of a fractal shape has the feel of smaller forms within larger forms within larger forms. This is also a quality of a gestural line. An abstract or otherwise non-objective mark in a painting or drawing cannot be called rich in gesture just because it is done in a loose or fast manner, it must also be expressive of the same layered complexity as organic life. Subtlety and complexity in a truly gestural figure drawing can indicate countless layers of meaning or content with regards to the model's

state of mind, age, emotional well-being etc., simply through a few seemingly simple marks. “Gestural” is a fractal condition.

3.5 Chandrama: A Closer Look

This section will take a close look at two paintings: one of my own, and one of Jackson Pollock’s, to identify some singular features of the vibrant flow approach. Though Chinese brush painting was a serious practice and a key starting point for Mark Tobey, faster and more automatic approaches such as dripping, splashing, and staining are commonly associated with the American gestural abstractionists. Even artists like Franz Kline whose touch was more controlled and deliberate made marks that imply speed and quick impulse. One of the features of paintings that are generated through vibrant flow is this: the size of the brushes, the speed of execution, or the fluidity of the materials may be varied to whatever extent intuition requires as long as the mind remains silent. This kind of flexibility allows for the evolution of wider aesthetic and a potentially more complex visual world. I’d like to now have a look at *Chandrama* to see identifying features that can be compared and contrasted with an action painting, in this case Jackson Pollock’s *Lucifer*. I have chosen action painting, (and gestural abstraction) because these and my works start with many shared features.

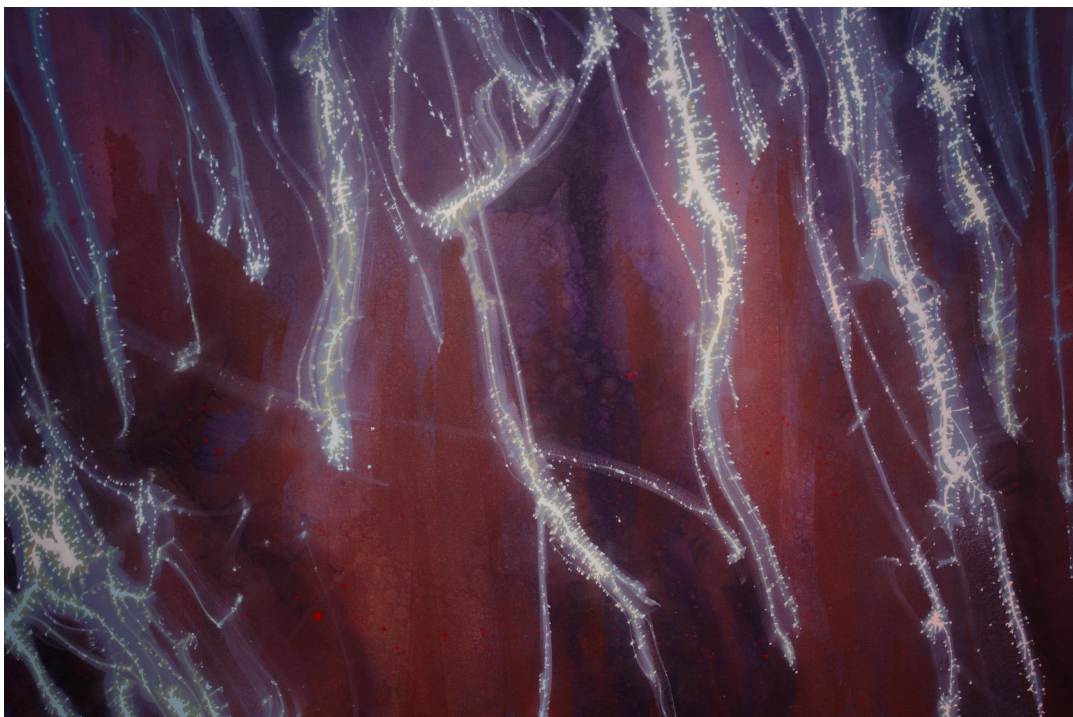


fig 6. William Downey. *Chandrama*. 2013. Oil on Canvas

Look at *Chandrama* (fig 5) and consider the elements from lightest to darkest: the white-blue highlights are without pattern in the sense that there is no group or arrangement of marks that evenly repeats either in symmetry or asymmetry. The marks nonetheless feel organized through a unity of gesture. Organization and unity without pattern or arrangement: that paradoxical state of affairs is difficult to pin down. Imagine the highlights represent gauze, or some even looser and more irregular woven natural fabric, cheesecloth perhaps. As delicate as cheesecloth is, its difficult to rip to pieces, and even cutting it with scissors causes it to bunch and pucker up as the weave gets pulled here and there. Lets continue to hold these objects our minds. Some of the pieces we are imagining are long thin strips, even single long threads with short lateral bits along its length. Others are wider more substantial pieces. Now we will imagine flinging the pieces on the wind, lit by a bright blue light against a dark background like an evening sky. What kind of imagery would we expect to see? Each shred of cheesecloth will be unique in length, width, shape, and in the manner in which the wind animates it, and yet there are many properties the pieces share, the weight of the fabric, the longitudinal and latitudinal arrangement of the fibres, how soft or how crisp the material is, et., etc. So this arrangement has countless varieties of both difference and similarity. A pattern language will emerge, a gestural continuity, —a shared wind speed and direction (more or less) and a consistent voice will be shared among all the pieces owing to their common material and other shared structures. If it were a purple twilight backlighting this snapshot of cheesecloth strips thrown in the breeze, we might arrive at imagery similar to the *Chandrama* painting. I suggest this visual simile so we can think about the image of this painting in terms of a unity that is also free from constraint through repetition, symmetry, or cadenced patterning. So without the complexities of our “real world” snapshot of cheesecloth with the fabric’s molecular properties, wind directions, gravity, colour of cotton, colour of light, and all the combinations and permutations thereof, how does one arrive at a such a gesturally rich image spontaneously without any source material before one’s eyes, memory or imagination? If we set aside the differences between the painting and the cheesecloth image like the blobs of blue light at the ends of the “fibres” round the perimeters of the “objects”, there is

still a consistent and notable feel of fibre, breeze, and of lightweight objects falling. So what source provided the fundamental spirit that animates these qualities in free and loose unison?

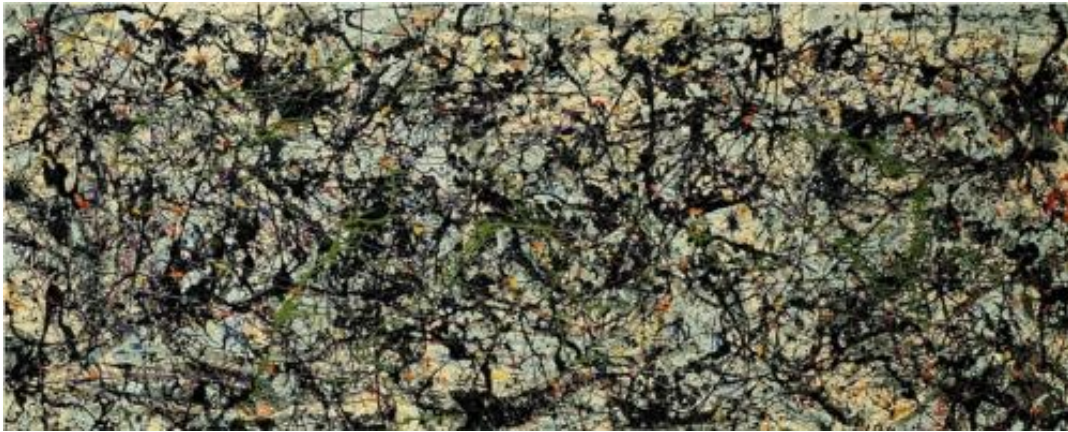


fig. 7. Pollock, Jackson, *Lucifer*, 1947 Gloss Enamel on Canvas.

Lets consider Jackson Pollock's "drip" painting *Lucifer*. Like our strands and bunches of cheesecloth, Pollock's drips were subject to the vagaries of air currents, characteristics of the material in motion, gravity and so on. Pollock's alkyd "house painting" (enamel) type paints would be flung and dripped in long strands, and the artist's gestures could not determine the marks in any controlled way. This apparent lack of control would nonetheless trace the artist's height, posture, speed of gesture, mood, intent etc., not unlike the manner in which the strands of cheesecloth took to the wind would still trace the intentions and awareness of the fabric flinger, however inscrutably. We can imagine Pollock getting into a nice rhythm, developing the groove or "spirit" of the thing so that the tenuous relationship between the action of his hand, arm, and body and the resulting paint images could become amplified, or we might say refined through hundreds of intersecting layers. If we shot pictures of our cheesecloth flinging again and again and layered these photographs through dozens of iterations, we might arrive at an image that shared a great deal with a Jackson Pollock drip painting. *Chandrama's* elements, like most elements in my non-objective paintings, are not the product of action painting, by which I mean that the marks are patient, deliberate strokes made one at a time, hand on brush, brush on canvas. So how does one remove *conscious* intent or ego from such an expression to arrive at our paradoxical unorganized unity? A drip painter could try a thousand times to repeat a particular drip twice

and never get close. As the hand is not applied to the canvas in such a case, any effort at producing a deliberate mark will be frustrated. So Pollock's genius was to arrive at a methodology that would always be poetic because deliberation was impossible. But what if the poetic content could be directly transmitted without abandoning control to chance effects of wind, gravity, the physics of drip momentum, and all? It would require a non-deliberate deliberation. So this is one way of considering the content of *Chandrama*, as the kind of deliberate spontaneity of the Zen brush painting or a pre-schooler's drawing. Different paintings among my non-objective works have different internal logic and structure, but the ones that reach a successful resolution share this gestural unison that makes them appear as if common natural forces are acting on their visual elements.

Conclusion

My hand is entirely the implement of a distant sphere. It is not my head that functions but something else, something higher, something somewhere remote. I must have great friends there, dark as well as bright.... They are all very kind to me.²¹

In *An Art of Our Own*, in the chapter, *Abstraction: A Religious Art—Sometimes*, Roger Lipsey makes the case that serious abstract art—of the class to which he assigns Klee, Modrian and Kandinsky—is made from analogies. Lipsey breaks analogy into two classes: allegory and symbol, and he assigns abstract art’s poetic capacity to symbol:

Symbols, on the other hand, are more than allegories: thought alone cannot devise them. They appear or are inherited. They participate in and even shape the instinctive and feeling life of human beings. They retain a quality of mystery, and they can convey metaphysical thought of tremendous scope in the form of a pattern or image. They lend themselves to acute intellectual inquiry, but since they encompass more of human life than intellect alone, we need more than thoughtfulness to assimilate them fully and appreciate them at their worth.²²

In centuries past, there was no question of a distinctly “spiritual” art because art participated in a world in which symbols were inherited. When the modern man emerged with his unprecedented level of autonomy, for better or for worse he was left to find his own symbols. So at the time when humankind most needed to discover art that “thought alone cannot devise” was the era in which intellect and reason had consolidated their reign over other sources of insight and meaning. I believe this accounts for Zen Buddhism’s hold on the imagination of the American avant-garde—as a means to receiving “metaphysical thought” as pattern or image. This is certainly the state of affairs that compels me to devote myself to developing the Sahaja state. That state is the

²¹ Klee, Paul, and Félix Klee. *The Diaries of Paul Klee 1898-1918*. Berkeley: U of California, 1968. 33

²² Lipsey, Roger. *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-century Art*. Boston: Shambhala, 1988. 24

place where my content is located, and I am compelled to say with Paul Klee that “I must have great friends there, dark as well as bright.... They are all very kind to me.”

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