

IMPLODING FORMS

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In the absence of any profound insights lending themselves to serious pronouncement, it is my intention to use this opportunity to playfully depict a collage of concepts related to visual art, its current expression and what I would hope, even if I cannot reasonably anticipate, might be its transition of expression in a world desperately seeking reconfiguration and reconciliation.

I have in mind a work of art, verbally presented and imaginatively interpreted. Like most of my creations I have no idea what this collection of cerebral forms will look like. I have only a context of presentation and a table top cluttered with ideas, those amorphous forms requiring discipline in their presentation. I am a thematic creationist in style. I begin, always, with the premise that information without context is trivia. Life is not a trivial pursuit. So, please, join me on this journey through abstraction.

Imagine first a coarse, pitted, splintery, four by eight foot sheet of CDX grade plywood; a piece of reality, if you will. The plywood I can muscle on my own. But for the work of creation I need your participation. Laying the board flat, let us apply the glue of academic discipline. A good, strongly bonding adhesive of liberal arts education. Sticky stuff. It's a good idea to keep the windows open. The fumes of education, applied in an enclosed area, have a tendency to make one light-headed. But, with adequate vandalization, it's a useful goo to hold one thing to another. Just smear it around. As far as I can tell there's nothing artistic about applying glue to a piece of plywood. It's just satisfying.

A good reminder.

Solid and viscous,

this blend of education and experience.

The yin and yang of academic life,

this blending of exposure and experience.

Bonding stuff.

Here, a bit more in the corner. It seems to me that the only two things which can never be taken away from a human being are education and experience. Experience providing the validity of life applied to concepts, education offering context for experience. There, all done.

Now, let's carefully mount this mirror onto the board. Yeah, I know a four by eight foot mirror is heavy and hard to handle. That's why I couldn't do this alone. Why are we doing this? Because I need a mirror. What good is education and experience without some method of reflection?

Yo! Careful.
Reflections are fragile things.
Chip your mirror
and you're in for bad luck.
Break mine
and I may shatter with it.
We need to be gentle
with each other's mirrors.

Okay. Is it square on your end? All right! Sometimes we just get lucky.

Now, you're going to love this, we need to drill holes, through the mirror and plywood, all the way around the perimeter. Why? Because we need some way of attaching insights to reflections. That's what these six-inch lengths of stainless steel tubing are for. Yeah, I know six inches isn't much of an insight. My problem has been that, if my insights get too extended, they won't support anything. No, I don't consider it a character flaw. I view it purely as a structural problem. Rude of you to ask though. Thank you too much.

Tell you what, since you're so piercing in your assessments, you can drill the holes. I know you only have two hands. So what if you can't hold a drill and cover your ears at

the same time? This is art. There's supposed to be suffering and sacrifice. You're just helping? Oh sure, throw that in my face.

Well, just a minute, there's a tungsten-carbide bit here someplace. I hate this part. Drilling through a mirror, penetrating your own reflections, is a real bitch. Here we go.

Oh god!
I hate that grinding, gnashing sound
of steel on glass.
It's just like the sound
you expect to hear
when a dentist drills a tooth.
Aaaaagh! You never actually hear it
until he hits the nerve.

Drilling insights through reflections is not something you do for fun. No, one hole is not enough. No, it's not time for a coffee break. Just stand there for a few minutes. Heh-heh, I hope the enamel on your teeth cracks.

Done. Wow, I hate that. I don't know any easy way to attach insights though. Hand me some of those rubber grommets. Oh yes, these are very important. You can't attach stainless steel insights directly to reflections without risking shattering the whole thing. In real life we call these grommets compassion. You hardly notice them, until they're not there.

Now, this is the tricky part. We've got to attach that big piece of glass, onto the top of the stainless steel tubing, and line it up so that we can run carriage bolts through the glass and the tubing and mirror and plywood. Then we put a nut on the end of the bolt. With a little luck the whole thing will hang together. The glass? It's perceptions, cognitions if you like, the screen upon which we view our lives.

Fragile?
Of course it's fragile.
Life is fragile.
It's stupid to attempt
this kind of stabile
until you're reasonably sure
that you have enough insights
to support it.

No, I don't know if I have enough, but I'm going to try. If it breaks I'll know where to put more support next time. Oh no, we don't have to drill holes in the glass. Perception always has holes in it. The trick is to match the right hole with the underlying insight. Be sure to add the grommets. We can't have insights rubbing up against perceptions without a buffer either. Yes, I know Plexiglas is stronger. I'm just not interested in technological solutions.

Not bad.
What do you mean big deal?
A mirror reflecting a piece of
clear glass?
I can see you're not
into this.
You think the moon
reflected in a pool
is really the moon?
No wonder artists suffer
and men of peace
are sacrificed.

Well, no bother. This isn't real life. This is unart, visual representation. Illusion in form. There is only unform here, no context. The synthesis of form and context requires

coloration and texture, the composition and layering of life on the field of perception. That's what all this stuff on the workbench is for.

The idea is to apply
the bifurcated elements
of every day engagement in the world
onto the bidimensional screen of perception.
And, if we have the insight to sustain it,
it assumes the three-dimensional illusion of
participating reflection.

The images are congruent only if the foundation of underlying experience is solid and we view the entire work head on – directly centered. Hell of an illusion if we can pull it off. Makes a nice piece of art, too.

Let's throw some stuff up on the glass and see what sticks. What kind of stuff? Ideas of course. This is an academic art form. There are strict rules for presentation – but maybe we can bend them just a bit here and there. Nuts! Somewhere in this pile of stuff was some material about an artist who slapped pigments together and included letters and numbers as random orientation. Can't find it now, reminded me of footnotes though.

Attribution to
a more original source,
review of the literature,
cite references as appropriate.

One of the rules of academic art is the minimization of original thought. That's understandable, Academics is too serious to be played with by random, unstructured, creative thought. So, we'll keep this one within cultural bounds, something like Stuart Davis did with Visa (Preble and Preble, 1985 p397); references added as appropriate.

What colors shall we use? Always a major decision. Do you like Edgar Wind? He was, maybe still is, an art historian. Referring to a German Expressionist painting exhibit he said,

“The walls were filled with apocalyptic pictures painted in violent colors and incongruous shapes...It occurred to me that if all these intense pictures, one after the other, had been experienced by me with the intensity they demanded, I ought to be out of my mind, but I clearly was not...I came to the conclusion that something was wrong; that these paintings produced an illusion of intensity, but not so intense as they presented” (Wind, 1965 p28).

I have seen such illusion of intensity. It is not necessary to cross the threshold of a gallery or museum to view such displays.

I have seen in the board rooms,
sat at the conference tables,
participated in the power breakfasts
which weave the tapestry
of busy emptiness.

My preference for colors has evolved over the years. The insight upon which this preference rests is approaching its seventh anniversary.

“The artist who specialized in survival used vibrant colors. Red, orange, yellow, intense shades of green. It is difficult to learn to use pastels and create a comparable sense of aliveness” (Jones, 1988 p6).

Pastels for now, I think. Quiet colors. The subdued colors of springtime. The colors of a child's bedroom, safe and soothing. I concur with Morris Graves, “I like any work of art where conceit does not intrude...Anonymity is a state of mind I very much respect” (Graves, 1962 p110). Anonymity is a very sparse commodity. Certainly it is not the route to tenure, recognition and status.

A brown, I think. An earth tone is a good choice for anonymity. Art in anonymity, collective art, participatory art, unsigned masterpieces, the primal art of the people who have lived and died across the connected eons. Religious artifacts, ritual paintings of animals deep within the womb of the earth. Unclaimed. Unsigned. Anonymous. Powerful.

The inspiration? The same as now I suppose – Terror. Rather, the reconciliation of terror; the need to resolve the sense of being separate and apart, cut off, without connectedness, without direct participation in the life force. Primal art has always been an expression of the intention of connectedness between human beings and the cosmos. Its animated expression is the ritual, most profoundly, the dance.

Aah, dance. Here's let's add some yellow. No, not too bright. Tone it down a bit. There, participation in the dance, textured white and yellow. Softening in its effect. Brilliant in its detail.

So far removed from primal participation and connectedness, Western culture is alienated from its own technological constructs. As Edgar Wind pointed out,

“For more than a century most of Western art has been produced and enjoyed on the assumption that the experience of art will be more intense if it pulls the spectator away from his ordinary habits and preoccupation...it would seem that almost all the artistic triumphs of the last one hundred years were in the first instance triumphs of disruption: the greatness of an artist became manifest in his power to break up our perceptual habits and disclose new ranges of sensibility” (Wind, 1965 p18).

Triumphs of disruption – far out. Seems a far cry from Rousseau's ideal of the natural man. But, then, we can represent that ideal too.

Here, a glob of stringent brown
on the tip of the pallet knife.

Hold the handle firmly

pull back the blade and
Splat!
Aah, brown. Brown!
Glorious horseshit brown,
the color of the ideal of
the natural man.

The western urbanites who believe in the back to the earth, homestead and hibernate, natural man approach to reconciling our world have never followed a wounded black bear into a willow thicket. No. No. No.

We buy our meat at Safeway.
Adventures are for weekends,
within driving distance of
comfortable shelter.
Splat!
hot food
Splat!
medical treatment facilities and
color television.
Splat!
Reference as appropriate.
As I said,
Splat!
Natural.

It's important to be judicious in the application of browns. Brown is an earth tone, too much and you may not be able to clear it away. There's enough Glop Art around. I suspect that's what Herbert Marcuse had in mind,

“...very real are the young who have no more patience, who have with their own bodies and minds, experienced the horrors and the oppressive comforts of the given reality; real are the ghettos and their spokesmen; real are the forces of liberation all over the globe, East and West, First, Second and Third world. But the meaning of this reality to those who experience it can no longer be communicated in the established languages and images – in available forms of expression, no matter how new, how radical they may be” (Marcuse, 1970 p124).

What color is alienation? Mauve will do. You don't see it all that often in a natural setting. Mauve is one of those technological colors, fabricated for doctor's waiting rooms. A sedentary, anesthetic hue intended to deaden the anxiety while you wait to find out if the biopsy was positive.

It's interesting that Marcuse penned his comments some twenty years ago. Some mauve right here will do. What do you think? The sixties and early seventies, a time of massive social trauma. Every cultural institution was being openly questioned, if not directly attacked. Remember? Berkeley. Free Speech. Black Panthers. SDS. CIA. LSD. Jimmie Hendrix. The Stones. Khe Sahn. Tet. KIA. Body Count. The Chicago Seven. Peter Berger's academic art provided a clarity of perception ignored in the mayhem,

“...the facticity of the social world or any part of it suffices for self legitimation as long as there is no challenge. When a challenge appears, in whatever form, the facticity can no longer be taken for granted. The validity of the social order must then be explicated, both for the sake of the challengers and of those meeting the challenge. The children must be convinced, but so must their teachers. The wrongdoers must be convincingly condemned, but this condemnation must also serve to justify their judges. The seriousness of the challenge will determine the degree of elaborateness of the answering legitimations” (Berger, 1967 p___).

Let's redden it some. A dark mauve, hemoglobin red; the cultural displacement of an entire generation resulting from our immersion in absurdity. A splat of hemoglobin red right here – for memory's sake.

“Existential trauma is the loss of the individual's sense of meaning and purpose. It is the loss of the illusion of indefinite duration which is the

fundamental intention which culture, and from it society, serves. The result of existential trauma is the death of the cultural identity predicated on the ideals, beliefs, myths, symbols, ceremonies and rituals of the individual's culture of origin" (Jones, 1989).

No wonder the waiting rooms are mauve. The interior designer's purpose is to surround people with the colors and textures that validate their identity as they seek professional assistance.

Curious isn't it? What started out as fragile, spacial lightness takes on a heavy, somber quality with the application of just a few basic colors. What's the point? The point is contrast – light on dark – perception in depth and clarity. See how little of the glass is actually covered? Five percent, ten percent perhaps. Not much. It's the quality of the mirror reflecting nothing on the unused portions of the glass that draws attention to the colors. The effect is similar in intent to the Zen landscape attributed to Mi Fei or The Herdsman by Claude Lorrain (Preble and Prebel, 1985 p93).

So why use a four by eight foot field, intricately connected to display trauma, alienation and cultural displacement? Exactly. That's not the purpose. I have something else in mind. Something so primal and new, so powerful and majestic to our generation that it can only be hinted at on a field so small. What I have in mind, juxtaposed against the tawdry grays of celebrities, is the emergence of Heroes in our lifetime. Why this particular form of expression? Otto Rank gives us a context,

“We can...sum up the relation of the artist to his art as follows: the artist, as a definite creative individual, uses the art-form that he finds ready to his hand in order to express a something personal; this personal must therefore be somehow connected with the prevailing artistic or cultural ideology, since otherwise he could not use them, but he must also differ, since otherwise he would not need to use them in order to produce something of his own” (Rank, 1936 p6).

Let us begin with the great sweeping strokes of orange – up and out toward a vanishing point fixed in the outback of beyond. Here and there – arcs and swirls of incandescence, recalling the thoughts of Alexander Calder,

“If you can imagine a thing, conjure it up in space – then you can make it, and tout de suite you’re a realist. The universe is real but you can’t see it. You have to imagine it. Once you imagine it you can be realistic about reproducing it” (Calder, 1962 p42).

Remember I said before that the inspiration is Terror? In these bold strokes and brilliant pigments, then, we pay homage to chaos and specifically to its henchman, Death.

“Both the forms of death and the frequency of loss experienced by survivors were beyond the range of normal human experience.”

“Death did not come peacefully in Vietnam. It did not lay in repose on satin covers, surrounded by flowers and grieving loved ones. Death was not attended to by skilled professionals competent in the art of giving death a peaceful appearance.”

“In Vietnam death raged, full blown and evil, from the bowels of the earth. It shrieked in ecstasy amidst the screams of the wounded. It glided effortlessly through the gunfire, pausing only briefly to assure itself that the mutilated body a young man held in his arms had no pulse. Death viewed its handiwork with satisfaction as the scorched, tree-like husk of an incinerated human being was stuffed, among wretching and curses, into an olive drab plastic bag.”

“Ever present, death clung defiantly and in jubilation to the absurdity of Vietnam. It exerted its dominance through all the human senses, especially the most primal sense, the survivor’s sense of smell. What did Vietnam smell like? Diesel fuel, burning shit and death. Survivors did not come back to the world with maturity. They returned very, very old” (Jones 1989).

As Marlon Brandon asserted in the celluloid artform Apocalypse Now, “if horror is not an any then, truly, it is an enemy to be feared.” Against these streaks of orange, vibrant respect for suchness in human experience, we can delineate the distinction between heroes and celebrities.

Here, don in the corner where they can be acknowledged without accolades, let’s insert the symbols celebrities appropriate to themselves; the dull, repetitious splotches of black and white sound bites; the enamel white of gleaming teeth and the unfocused red dots of

unseeing eyes, blinded by spot lights. Here, too, we reserve a space for celebrities of contemporary art – the entrepreneurial artist, critic and dealer who presume the habits of the secular priesthood.

“But this new ‘religion of genius’, as Zissel calls it, created on a type and no longer on a collectivity; it was indeed individual and even psychological, in its emphasis, based wholly on the artist and no longer on art, on style” (Rank, 1932 p19).

Celebrities deserve little space. They contribute nothing of enduring value to the human quest for congruency. At best a celebrity adds nomenclatures to the list of things that ‘don’t mean nothin’.” More often the celebrities’ indulgence in persona accents the deprivation of the many. This is why celebrities have earned their place of insignificance amid the mauve numbness of our collage. Celebrities transcend all categories of contemporary culture; artist, anchor person, politician, chairman of the board, athlete. What I express as celebrity, Otto Rank described in the alienation of art,

“The individual artist...no longer uses the collective ideology of religion to perpetuate himself, but the personal religion of genius, which is the precondition of any productions by the individual artist-type...and so we have...modern art, based on the concept of individual genius and perpetuated by concretization, which has found its clearest expression in the personality-cult of the artistic individuality itself” (Rank, 1932 p45).

What, then, of the Hero? We have reserved a great deal of space for the presentation of this personified archetype. What is it that is intended to be conveyed? First, hand me the tube of blue please. Here, in a transgalactic, spiraling expanse is the representation of fidelity; a fidelity swirling in compassion that is the source of all life. And, here, some silver accents to reaffirm this enduring quality. We are too much influenced by the dysfunction of our era. We are too intent on denying our entropic return to chaos. Life continually emerges and we pay it no heed. Life does not perpetuate itself from chaos, but from Cosmos. Chaos is too transitory to support life.

Joseph Campbell specified the Hero’s deed,

“The courage to face the trials and bring a whole new body of possibilities into the field of interpreted experience for other people to experience – that is the hero’s deed” (Campbell, 1988 p41).

The Hero’s journey has been described in the mythological artform of all peoples. The Hero is one who willingly, or by circumstance, embarks upon the journey beyond the cultural context, outside the range of normal human experience. No longer secure in the safety of the herd, the Hero endures the terror of confrontation with the forces of death, chaos and oblivion. At times the confrontations demand action. At other points the only path to survival is maintaining the vigil, the will to wait in the swirling vortex of chaos; to face the terror of existential doubt. The Cosmos does not render itself visible in prepackaged deference to man’s will. Alone on the ridgeline, neck hairs bristling in the static charge, the Hero exercises the right to demand congruity in the midst of absurdity. With the compression of the primal diaphragm the Hero screams at the infinite. Lighting crashes, tree trunks are cleaved with malicious intensity. With nowhere left to go the Hero screams and, invoking the human right, incurs the cosmic obligation – the obligation to listen to the intensity of the silence.

What is the representation of this journey into silence? It is the arc. Here, rising from the earth tones, broad and confident, the green shades of every day reality clinging easily in this lower realm. Now, distilled in its upward sweep, it becomes iridescent reds and yellows; accelerating, constricting, writhing.

Finely, minutely constellating into the
purest intense white
as it merges
with the blue and silver
of fidelity and compassion.
Lost. Disconnected. Absorbed.

But this liminal state, transcending time and space, is not the final, evolved state of the Hero. Absorption in silence is the genesis of commitment.

“The hero is one who comes to participate in life courageously and decently, in the way of nature, not in the way of personal rancor, disappointment or revenge. The hero’s field of action is not the transcendent but here, now, in the field of time, of good and evil – of the pairs of opposites” (Campbell, 1988 p66).

The ultimate validation of the Hero is not absorption in cosmic liminality but the willingness and commitment to return to the world. The Hero’s commitment is not to do, but to be. The Hero does not return in the celestial garb of the conqueror but in the habit of humility. The Hero is one who comes with the power of the servant, the symbol of reconciliation in the household of human consciousness. The power of the servant? As it has always been – access.

Who among us does not long for the presence of one who will be with us in our moments of utter despair? Who among us does not seek the reassurance of one who knows that faith is the living side of enduring? Who among us will not accept the gifts of fidelity and compassion offered to us, just as we are?

So, the arc reemerges from the blue and silver, farther to the right in our representation. The apex of the journey only suggested, somewhere far beyond, the blue and silver tones we have used. Descending at first in the clarity of white, gathering color as it reenters the fields of time and space; finally to merge as a respondent pillar, set firmly in the earth, gathering all color to itself.

Done. The tones textured on the glass are now reflected in the mirror. Centered, we see the matching forms congruent in size and shape, one balancing the other. Only one thing remains; to display this representation in a way that is not dishonest.

“Behind all these manifestations is the one radiance, which shines through all things. The function of art is to reveal this radiance through the created object” (Campbell, 1988 p107).

Here, help me. Lift your end up. We need to elevate the top to a forty-five degree angle. Well, of course the shapes are no longer reflected congruently. How could my perceptions be absolutely congruent with anyone else's? If we left this representation in a way that suggested that people could achieve congruence just by where they stood it would be dishonest. What is important is that others have a sense of hope for the possible. This is not life. This is art. That's all. That's enough.

Sign it?

No.

The image was a gift to me.

I have no claim to it.

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