



*Studio, 2004*

## **The Abstract Unconscious**

**Michael Evans**

## ***Some Suggestions on the Role of Process in my Paintings***

I would like to start with a brief introduction to my paintings, as they are the motivating force behind this text and the ideas contained within it. Perhaps I should start with one of the most basic aspects of my practice whereby my paintings are initiated through a detached method of pouring paint, I call it process painting; it provides a method to carry on painting in the face of doubt. Process, in one sense, requires no belief, just the material and the desire to make paintings. However, my desire is to make paintings that have “significance” and embody “meaning.” For me, process takes on meaning as an act of faith in existence through a celebration of matter; though this may often be outside the conscious awareness of many artists. I am motivated by the pleasure of watching paint move around a surface waiting for a moment when the painting “makes itself” and meaning feels not to have come from me.



***Figure 1 Work in progress, Michael Evans***

I view paint not only as capable of internal “expressive” possibilities but also as an external agent, existing “objectively” or externally, capable of containing expressive potential through the

transformative act of the artist but also mysteriously capable of provoking aesthetic responses through its very substance and physical appearance, even

without the “expressive” input of the painter. The process painter lets paint behave as paint. There ensues a careful watching of how materials behave and a sensitive response to these qualities. The writer James Elkins likened painting to alchemy, seeing painting as rooted in the physical but extending beyond it. He observes,

Science has closed off almost every unsystematic encounter with the world. Alchemy and painting are two of the last remaining paths into the deliriously beautiful world of unnamed substances.

(Elkins 2000, p. 199)

My recent paintings combine technology (where groups of paintings are reconfigured and combined using computer software) with a concern for an “otherness” which may lie beyond culture, beyond the self, even beyond the unconscious, but which I feel can sometimes be approached through painting. Suppose this to be true, then what language could describe such otherness? How could it be pictured? At present perhaps the only adequate approach may be via the abstract and the unconscious. George Steiner, talking about “otherness” says,

... When artists and writers tell us that they are not regents over the complete or latent meanings of their own devisings, it is to this ‘otherness’ that they testify...This ‘otherness’ seems to me to be, almost materially, like an ever-renewed vestige of the original, never wholly accessible moment of creation. It is, in the idiom and image of current cosmology, the ‘background radiation’ which tells us of the coming into being of our world.

(Steiner 1991, p. 210)

For me, the unconscious, profound aesthetic experience and what was once called “spiritual” experience are interlinked, as they are for George Steiner, so I return

to him to introduce some of the broader issues surrounding concepts such as otherness, authorship, the spiritual and the unconscious which I now wish to explore further.

In most cultures, in the witness borne to poetry and art until most recent modernity, the source of 'otherness' has been actualized or metaphorized as transcendent. It has been evoked as divine, as magical, as daimonic. It is a presence of radiant opacity. That presence is the source of powers ...in the [art]work, neither consciously willed nor consciously understood. It is, today, conventional to ascribe this vital excess to the unconscious. Such ascription is a secular phrasing of what I have called 'alterity'...It is not the style of designation that matters: it is the affirmation, implicit and explicit, in poetry, in art...of the agonistic-collaborative presence of agencies beyond the governance or conceptual grasp of the craftsman...a metaphysical act, an encounter with the opaque and precedent authority of presence.

(Steiner 1991, p. 211)

Steiner sees this “vital excess” as integral to spiritual and aesthetic experience and given a secular base or location in the unconscious. It would seem that for many the idea of the unconscious can provide an acceptably secular method of accounting for “alterity”, without having to open up “metaphysical” or “spiritual” possibilities. The difficulty for me, however, lies in exploring these experiences without diminishing them. My exploration has ranged from theological thought to post-modern theory (and increasingly now these two strands seem to interconnect) but my problem is a sense of uncertainty, an uncertainty of how one may now attempt to make abstract paintings that contain the spiritual, aesthetic or unconscious depth found in the works of great modern artists such as Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman. I share this doubt with many contemporary

abstract painters, particularly with Gerhard Richter, who when comparing his work to that of the abstract expressionists stated that, “They had the conviction that what they were doing was good and right. And that’s it. I lack that in every stroke” (Richter 2002, p. 181).



*Figure 2 Abstract Painting 2, 30x20, acrylic and oil on canvas, Michael Evans*

This is typical of a certain type of post-modern mindset, a feeling that we have somehow been born too late, that everything has been done. We are left with the possibility of revisiting the ideas of the past, either unknowingly, in a naive sense, or in a knowing, often ironic sense, in the form of quotation, pastiche or parody. I am reminded of W.B. Yeats when he laments in “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”, “What can I but enumerate old themes?” (Yeats, 1936/1971). The painter Ian McKeever

finds the implications for painting suggested by such a way of thinking rather worrying, saying,

... such a self-conscious act as the broad gestural brushstroke can verge upon the embarrassing, can look academic or at worst naïve. It is as if this act had entered the realm of painting’s clichés, like certain subject matter: the still-life or the landscape, for example. Become one of those things which, although they have historically underpinned painting, have been increasingly considered incapable of standing alone in the service of art. If

used now, they must be foregrounded, consciously quoted, in order to have validity. Yet, the question of how such things can be used in painting is still a valid issue. As is the need for the painter to be prepared to risk the embarrassment of appearing naïve...

(McKeever 2005, p. 46)

What was once given, that the brushstroke or gesture can act as “pure” expression, a direct path to the unconscious, is now shrouded in uncertainty, becoming another “language” or stylistic device to be analysed or contextualized. Perhaps now other strategies are needed to bypass the conscious mind, paths which may not involve recourse to a familiar aesthetic of the “expressive,” or now perhaps over-familiar visual strategies for accessing (or perhaps worse “picturing”) the “unconscious,” but how have we arrived at this position?

In order to explore further, I will first attempt to define some key terms. Clive Bell wrote “Art and religion belong to the same world. Both are bodies in which men try to capture and keep alive their shyest and most ethereal

conceptions” (Bell 1983, p.148). He saw art and religion as manifestations of man’s sense of “ultimate reality” (ibid.). For me, spiritual and aesthetic experience could be categorised as largely unconscious in nature and may be variations of the same experience. (I could add to this, the sublime, the numinous



Figure 3 Abstract Painting 4, 30x20, acrylic and oil on canvas, Michael Evans

or mystical experience.) By exploring the intertwined fate of the spiritual and the unconscious, I hope to shed light on problems facing painters who still wish to explore aesthetic experience of a depth similar to that described by Bell or Steiner.

### ***The Spiritual and the Unconscious***



***Figure 4 Abstract Painting 6, 30x20, acrylic and oil on canvas, Michael Evans***

If the term unconscious is used to denote any experience unavailable to the conscious mind, or any source or feeling that seems to come from “beyond” the rational mind, when the painter works without conscious control does the unconscious act as a conduit for certain types of experience or are these experiences products of the unconscious? I am left with uncertainty as to where, how and why my most profound experiences take place and what to call them, how to recognise them -

give them a home. All I can be sure of is that I have experiences of “vital excess”. In our deepest and most profound yearnings and affirmations, it seems impossible to stand outside in objectivity. I use the term unconscious from this point on with a sense of doubt or uncertainty, the best term available for something that lies beyond my conscious or rational experience which I can neither analyse, judge, identify, or locate. The psychoanalyst Viktor Frankl

observed the limitations of the conscious mind criticising the Freudian model of the unconscious saying,

Freud saw only the unconscious instinctuality, as represented in what he called the id; to him the unconscious was first and foremost a reservoir of repressed instinctuality. However, the spiritual may also be unconscious; moreover, existence is *essentially* unconscious, because the foundation of existence cannot fully reflect upon and thus cannot be fully aware of itself.

(Frankl 2000, p. 31)

For Frankl, the unconscious becomes linked with “spiritual” experience and neither can be fully comprehended. At this point it is necessary to make a distinction between spiritual experience and organized religion. I would characterize religion as the socialization, reification and ossification of the “vital” spiritual experience. This is close to Rudolph Otto’s concept of an original “numinous” core to religious experience which is then built upon and often buried (Otto 1917/1959). While there are significant similarities between Otto’s numinous experience and aesthetic experience – particularly the sublime, also, more worryingly there are parallels between organized religion and originally vital artistic movements which become empty and formalised, a façade of a once vital experience. It would seem the visionary or mystic is always condemned to be overtaken by the systemiser and the law maker.

### ***Nihilism***

Religion (or any transcendental experience) is made increasingly difficult by the secular world but even more worryingly a second crisis of faith is now



possible, a failure of belief in the core ideals of the Enlightenment, a crisis of the rational mind and its belief in endless progress. With faith in neither the secular or religious world view, nihilism closes in. As Frankl observed,

Today, man's will to meaning is frustrated on a worldwide scale. Ever more people are haunted by a feeling of meaninglessness which is often accompanied by a feeling of emptiness...an existential vacuum.

(Frankl 2000 p. 139)

Lack of meaning within society as a whole will inevitably be reflected in its art.

The artist Francis Bacon described this sense of meaninglessness in the following statement:

...I think that man now realizes that he is an accident, that he is a completely futile being, that he has to play out the game without reason. I think that, even when Velasquez was painting, even when Rembrandt was painting, in a peculiar way they were still, whatever their attitude to life, slightly conditioned by certain types of religious possibilities, which man now, you could say, has had completely cancelled out for him...all art has now become completely a game by which man distracts himself; and you may say it has always been like that, but now it's entirely a game.

(Bacon 1987, pp. 28-29)

Of course this statement raises more questions than it answers. Why bother with this meaningless game? How can one deepen something which is at best a "distraction?" The problem would seem that once Bacon has lost the ability to subscribe to a religious world view he is left with no sense of meaning. Unable to experience deeper meaning, he drifts into hedonism. Bacon represents a strong

current of pessimism, rooted in a struggle with the sense of meaninglessness which has haunted the Western mind throughout its secularization. This process has been charted by the writer Colin Wilson with his concept of the “Outsider.” The outsider is not at ease within a “modern” meaningless culture, desperately needing deeper meaning but unable locate it within his/her own culture, the way is barred from going back to previous forms of meaning, once underpinned by



*Figure 5 Abstract Painting 8, 30x20, acrylic and oil on canvas. Michael Evans*

religious possibilities. It is a situation of profound alienation but alienation can take place on different levels. The individual can be entirely alienated from meaning or purpose (similar to Bacon) but it is also possible to remain in touch with glimpses of meaningfulness. Wilson insists that the outsider’s problem lies in mistaken assumptions about these glimpses of meaningfulness. If meaning previously came with an identifiable “religious” label,

often the outsider (Wilson looks to many Romantics and existentialists as examples) comes to see it either as illusion, or equally disastrously to view reality as a kind of “let down,” a pale shadow of the dimension of true meaningfulness. For Wilson it is important not to confuse the shallowness of a culture with broader philosophical issues, thus extending cultural pessimism into the

philosophical realm of world rejection. Ian McKeever, experiences pessimism not about painting, but with the shallowness of contemporary culture. He states,

Painting... becomes with time a moral issue. A devotion to the integrity of the work and to the continued practice of painting itself.

In that sense the painter is like a priest. If that sounds too grand then wait, for I would go even further, in saying that the painter is the true custodian of art...

For many disciplines, that are now considered art, will slowly become other things, forms of entertainment, tourist attractions or other means of social catharsis. Many artists will increasingly become a part of popular culture, superstars, like pop stars, working with museums, which abandon art as such and would rather seek to blur the boundaries between entertainment and what was art in order to popularize and appease a bewildered and sceptical audience. Much art will thus become cultural tourism, just more noise in the act of living.

Art that wishes to remain art will yet again become marginalised to survive... Much else that began as art, will simply ebb and flow with the tide of change, become change itself for its own sake.

(McKeever 2002, p. 28)

McKeever sees painting as an experience of “authenticity” in an increasingly shallow culture and art world. Painter Gerhard Richter has also referred to the shallowness of the “art world” saying, “Art takes shape in spite of it all, rarely and always unexpectedly” (Richter 1993, p. 221).

However, maybe it is because both McKeever and Richter attach such importance to art and the artist, that they can be so disappointed. In *The Banalization of Meaninglessness*, Karen L. Carr makes a distinction between

modern and post-modern nihilism. She points out that thinker's such as Nietzsche were aware of loss in their nihilism but viewed it as a necessary state of transition, whereas post-modern nihilism greets the sense of loss with a "yawn." However, for some the sense of spiritual or religious loss is still felt deeply even in a postmodern era, whereas for those with a tendency toward a certain type of postmodern indifference the loss is perhaps not consciously experienced. I would suggest that whether or not consciously felt, the loss of a recognized spiritual or religious dimension in life is a loss experienced by us all even if we remain consciously unaware of it. To combat the sense of meaninglessness, I believe art has no other choice than to look to the spiritual/transcendental impulse and the unconscious. Interestingly, both areas experience difficulties under post-modernism. The critical climate in the art world has been hostile to the spiritual for many years, for example, Rosalind Krauss in 1985 greeted the passing of the sacred with a typical post-modern "yawn" stating,

Given the absolute rift that had opened up between the sacred and the secular, the modern artist was obviously faced with the necessity to choose between one mode of expression and the other...In the increasingly de-sacralized space of the nineteenth century, art had become the refuge for religious emotion; it became, as it has remained, a secular form of belief. Although this feeling could be discussed openly in the late nineteenth century, it is something that is inadmissible in the twentieth, so that by now we find it indescribably embarrassing to mention *art* and *spirit* in the same sentence.

(Krauss, 1985, p. 12)

## ***The Post-modernism Unconscious***

So spiritual possibilities may be dismissed by much of the art world but what of the unconscious? Stephen James Newton in *Painting, Psychoanalysis and Spirituality* (2001) suggests that a vital unconscious component within painting has been lost and that post-modern painting has become a form of “mannerism,” “pastiche” or “simulation.” Similarly, critic and theorist Donald Kuspit sees the end of modernism as being the end of art’s involvement with the unconscious as a primary source of creativity. He sees art which turns away from the unconscious and the aesthetic dimension as “postart.” In Kuspit’s opinion,

... unless the profound influence of the unconscious on modern art is understood, one cannot begin to understand the depth and credibility art in general lost when it forsook the unconscious... Postart looks to ideology and, more broadly, theory for a foundation – and significance – and attacks the unconscious by reducing it to an ideology, more particularly, a phenomena of bourgeois society... Dreams are trivialized and feelings dismissed – subjectivity as a whole is demeaned... In other words, from the postart ideological point of view society rather than subjectivity motivates art, which loses its inner dynamic in the course of representing society...

(Kuspit 2004, p. 90-91)

For Newton and Kuspit post-modernism has lost the unconscious dimension and with it personal or existential “authenticity.” However, Newton and Kuspit recognize modernism may have degenerated into an empty stylistic shell and in some ways post-modernism may have been a reaction to this. So we have a double problem, we are damned by a psychologically and emotionally empty

repetition if we remain with our modernist past or condemned to a seemingly endless cycle of ironic pastiche if we move forward into the post-modern future.

However, many modern artists have had a complex relationship with tradition (Manet for example) while the impressionists could be seen as rejecting it and abstract expressionism has been viewed as an attempt to start afresh escaping the shadow of the twin European influences of Surrealism and Cubism. If the notion of the avant-garde in revolt against established art underpinned modernism, is post-modernism so very different? Lyotard regarded post-modernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard 1979/1997, p. 999) but crucially, he still saw avant-garde art as functioning outside the already known, in a space with no existing language in order to acknowledge a reality beyond the culturally given one which he terms the “unrepresentable” (Lyotard 1998, pp. 125-126). He states,

Modern painters discover that they have to form images that photography cannot present...These painters discover that they have to present that there is something that is not presentable according to the legitimate construction...These works appear to be ‘monsters’, ‘formless objects’, purely ‘negative’ entities...When the point is to try to present that there is something that is not presentable, you have to make presentation suffer...The unrepresentable is what is the object of an Idea, and for which one cannot show (present) an example, a case, even a symbol. The universe is unrepresentable, so is humanity, the end of history, the instant, space, the good, etc...So one cannot present the absolute. But one can represent that there is some absolute. This is a ‘negative’...presentation.

(Lyotard 1998, pp. 125-126)

Perhaps declaring the death of grand narratives is a strategy (conscious or unconscious) of providing critical, philosophical and psychic space in which to renew aspects of culture and mind which had become static under modernism. Post-modernism here becomes not a programme of destruction but of renewal. In “The Re-enchantment of Art” Suzi Gablik defines two types of post-modernism, “deconstructive” and “reconstructive” (Gablik 1992).

I would agree there are signs of a “reconstructive” post-modernism but crucially differ from Gablik over what form this takes. I would suggest even in some of its apparently deconstructive phases postmodernism opened a space in which to think, created by a sense of uncertainty and a questioning attitude that cleared the way for new thought. Donald Kuspit in “The End of Art” proposes a modernism based around moments of “creativity” followed by periods of “entropic” decline or



*Figure 6 Abstract painting detail, Michael Evans*

“decadence” (Kuspit 2004). Viewed in this manner modernity could be seen to have had a vital (or series of vital) origins which have declined entropically; however, postmodernism could also be seen as containing similar elements of ‘vitality’ and energy for new thought. The problem may be that in challenging a declining modernism, some forms of postmodernism have undervalued, or even

failed to recognize essential elements of the creative process. Perhaps now both modernism and postmodernism need to be scrutinized to establish what is essential and what needs rethinking for our cultural moment.

### ***Doubt as a Path***

With a kind of archaeology of meaning in mind, I would like to briefly mention negative theology. A recent book concerning negative theology titled *Flight of the Gods* (Bulhof and Kate 2000) suggests contemporary thought may have arrived at an opening to a new and possibly more tolerant approach to matters spiritual or transcendental. If modernism witnessed the “death of God” perhaps under post-modernism we have seen the death a rigid form of rationalism. Editors Bulhof and Kate speculate that,

The ‘death of God,’...announces not only the death of the ‘old God’ – the god of philosophers, theologians and believers – but also the death of the modern god who set himself on his own throne: autonomous human reason. With the death of this ‘new god,’ might a sensitivity reappear for transcendence, for difference, for the sacred, for negation, in short, for religion?...In listening to the reactions to this dethronement of autonomous reason...[we] believe [we] hear echoes of an experience rooted partly in an old tradition [negative theology].

(Bulhof and Kate 2000, p. viii)

Negative theology’s relevance lies in its desire not to limit, its difficulty in naming, an acceptance of being smaller than the object of its contemplation, an ability to accept human limitations and crucially its similarity with some post-



modern thought in being able to live with uncertainty. Bulhof and Kate point to its “inclusive manner” suggesting,

All forms of negative theology affirm a not-knowing, a silence that implies the end of philosophy. The negative theological path of contradiction encourages abandoning ideas, not wrestling with them. This path is a means to overcome divisive thinking contained in the desire to delimit exactly what something is, and thus to demarcate exactly what is not. Negative theology is an inclusive manner of thinking: it permits the espousal of what does not go together, instead of requiring a choice for this or that.

(Bulhof and Kate 2000, p. 29)

This questioning of the limits of reason and analysis is reflected in the experience of many abstract painters. Entering into the realm of abstract painting means perhaps to be lost but this may be no bad thing as that which one is stepping away from may be an everyday, over familiar, deadened form of reality, in order to slip into a world of deeper meaning, unfamiliar and unsettling but indicative of other possibilities (or possibilities of the “other”). The artist may positively cultivate this capacity, as the painter Willem De Kooning said,

When I'm falling, I am doing alright. And when I am slipping, I say, 'Hey, this is very interesting.' It is when I am standing upright that bothers me...As a matter of fact, I'm really slipping most of the time into that glimpse. That is a wonderful sensation... to slip into this glimpse. I'm like a slipping glimpser.

(De Kooning 1994, p. 53)

De Kooning here aspires to a state of being lost or off-balance. It is through the loss of orientation that the all important “glimpse” is achieved. In Gerhard

Richter we see similarities concerning the importance of uncertainty when he says,

Strange though this may sound, not knowing where one is going – being lost, being a loser – reveals the greatest possible faith and optimism, as against collective security and collective significance. To believe, one must have lost God; to paint, one must have lost art.

(Richter 1993 p. 15)

Maybe uncertainty is an appropriate direction given our pluralist or fragmented culture and could be of use for those with sympathy for what was once termed “spiritual.” Is there now an opening in contemporary thought for “higher” or “deeper” levels of meaning? This may now need to be expressed via a language of doubt, however, this may be the only language available. When external referents for deeper levels of meaning fall away within the “host” culture, perhaps inevitably the painter will be left to explore the realms of the abstract and the unconscious; perhaps it is only they will provide a deeper and more meaningful alternative to the given reality.



*Figure 7 Separation Anxiety, Michael Evans*

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