

Abstract Photography: A Bridge to Imaginal Worlds

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Introduction

When I arrived in New York a few days before the 2012 *Art and Psyche Conference*, it felt wonderful to be immersed in the city, surrounded by so many things to see and experience. I immediately experienced the pull of fascinating things all around me that I felt compelled to photograph. Overhead, towering giants slowly dance (Fig. 1), or embrace over the decades and centuries (Fig. 2, 3). I am just as fascinated by the exposed steel bones of the city (Fig. 4), and by the signs of constant rebuilding and renewal (Fig. 5). Mysteries are hidden under our feet in the lowliest of manhole covers (Fig. 6), or in the sidewalk grates (Fig. 7). I especially love the overhead wires, which have their own music, as in these photographs that I took in Zurich (Fig. 8, 9 10).

Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

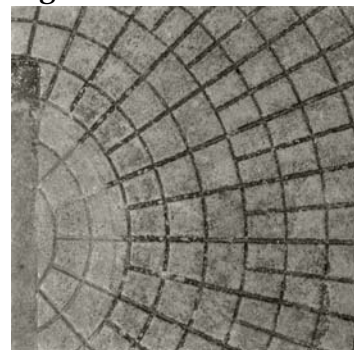


Fig. 7



Fig. 8

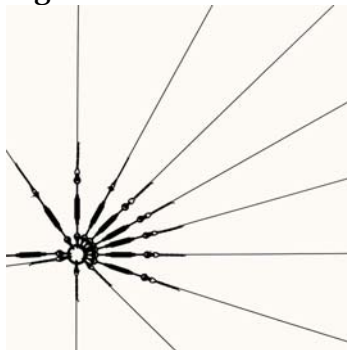


Fig. 9

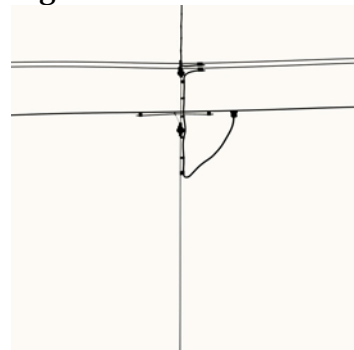
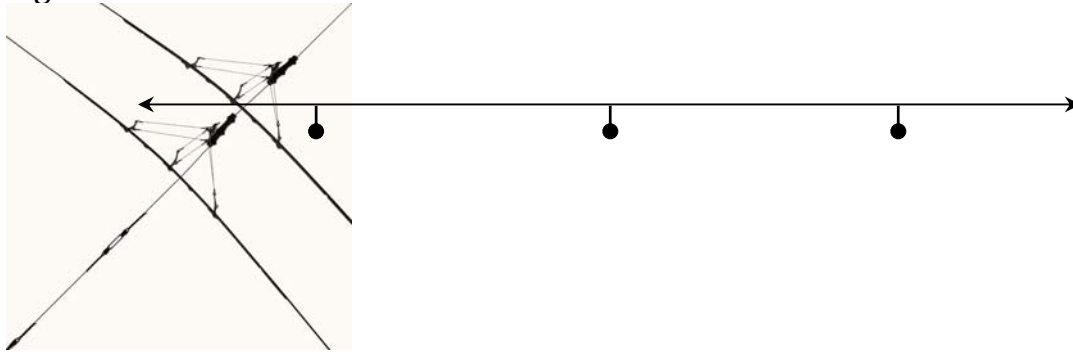


Fig. 10



Ever since I started making photographs (around 1998), I have been drawn to abstract images: patterns, textures, lines, simple geometric shapes, and rhythms. As I worked more with abstract photographs and learned more about Jungian psychology, I began to realize that creating abstract photographs is about much more than making a beautiful image. It is about making a connection with something deeper, a hidden intermediate level of reality where matter and spirit meet. That intermediate world is the psychoid in analytical psychology, or the imaginal world as it is called by Henri Corbin in the tradition of Sufism or mystical Islam, which I will be referring to because of its in-depth systematic analysis of imagination, and its understanding of the invisible world that we have largely lost sight of in our materially-oriented Western culture.

I will be talking about how abstract photography makes a bridge between this world and the imaginal world, or the psychoid¹. That is the very relationship between art, the psyche, and the city, in my view: the art comes out of the interaction between the psyche and the city (or whatever surroundings you are in); abstract photography comes from the meeting of matter and spirit. Understanding these concepts from analytical psychology and Sufism has been invaluable to me in my development as an abstract photographer.

What is abstract photography?

But first, I should say more about what I mean by abstract photography. As in all types of art, photographs range from representational to abstract (Fig. 11)

Fig.11

more representational

more abstract



¹ In analytical psychology, the psychoid is a place in between the conscious and unconscious.

On the left side is a photograph that clearly represents a tree in a landscape. It is one of my early photographs where I was not always as abstract. And even though it does not show the tree exactly as our eyes would see it, it still represents the tree fairly faithfully.

On the right side is a much more abstract photograph of a tree. I will be talking more about this series of photographs later, but for now I just want to show it as an example of an abstract photograph. While you can tell that there are branches and it looks somewhat like a tree, I have abstracted away from the tree's literal appearance and focused on other qualities.

There are also photographs that are in the middle, somewhat representational and somewhat abstract, like this center photograph. You can still tell pretty easily what it is, but some qualities of the tree are emphasized more than others, and the goal is not to have as literal a representation as the photograph on the left. This series of photos represents for me what I mean by abstract photography; when you move from the middle to the right side of the spectrum, you can see that the focus is not primarily on representing something from this world literally.

Photographs can become even more abstract than this, where it is an even greater challenge to recognize anything from the known external world. Even when conscious appreciation of the concrete object is difficult to grasp, it is important to remember that the photograph always begins with an existing physical object. . Even if you are photographing a beam of light, you are always capturing an image of something somewhere, so there is always a connection to our concrete, physical reality. And that is part of the inherent tension that I like about abstract photography.

So, how do you make an abstract photograph, since you are always photographing something in this world? One way is to isolate things from their ordinary context, focusing in on the object by itself. For example, the photograph that I showed earlier (Fig. 6) is obviously a manhole cover, but we do not usually appreciate these discs beneath our feet as we walk by. For the most part, we make a gross evaluation/perception and notice something round and metallic. The brain says "Yeah, yeah, it's a manhole cover," and we keep walking. But with a more thoughtful and astute eye, you see the lines, shapes, textures and beauty that actually exist as a part of functional city equipment. Photographing details in this way encourages the viewer to see artistic design that calls for more focused attention; art is abundant in everyday objects that are essential to city life

There are many other ways to make abstract photographs, too. For example, you can photograph things at a very small scale, as with these close-up photographs of plants. (Figs. 12, 13, 14) Each of the photographs is an extreme close-up of leaves, just about half an inch or an inch wide, and when you look closely, you see the leaves in an entirely different way; you see them as entire worlds unto themselves. (Figs. 15, 16)

Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15

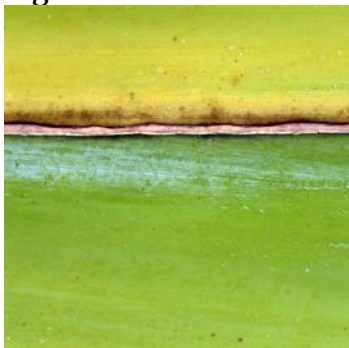


Fig. 16



You can also use alternative photographic processes to show things in a different light, like this photograph where I inverted the image by “cross-printing” a color image on black and white paper in the darkroom to give the feeling of an explosion of energy (Fig. 17). I call this image *Genesis* I used a different photographic process in this image (Fig. 18), where I took an ordinary daylight photograph of a tree, and inverted it in the darkroom so it looks like a flash of lightning against the night sky. Or as in my most recent series of photographs, you can get mysterious effects by building up multiple exposures (Fig. 19), or by photographing layered images. (Fig. 20)

Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19



Fig. 20



So, there are many different ways to make abstract photographs, but the critical issue involves techniques that open the possibility for the viewer to experience the subject of the picture in unique ways that diverge from how one would commonly perceive it. There is a transit from the every day to the imaginal. In all my photographs, I use a relatively sparse visual language to create a seemingly simple combination of geometric shapes, lines, curves, and textures, with a generally meditative tone. Through creative use of these elements the photographs move toward the territory of abstraction and connection to the symbolic, mysterious world of imagination. Here, I offer a brief precis of some types of abstract photographs to orient the reader to what will come as a more in depth discussion later in the paper. .

By way of background, I will note some of the many abstract photographers who have inspired me including Aaron Siskind, Imogen Cunningham, Charles Sheeler, Harry Callahan, and Mark Citret. And there are many abstract painters who have also inspired me such as Richard Diebenkorn, Mark Rothko, Brice Marsden, Jackson Pollock, Cy Twombly, and Piet Mondrian. Abstract painting and other artistic media are different from abstract photography in that they are free to directly depict the world of the psyche without necessarily having a direct tie to our outer ordinary world.

That can be a wonderful approach to take, but I, personally, prefer my art to maintain a direct connection to this world, to the city around us, for example. After all, to find amazing beauty, it is not necessary to go into the realm of pure imagination or go to another continent; creativity and beauty surround us, hidden in plain sight in lowly manhole covers, electric wires, and the simplest trees. Art and the psyche are in the city, or in your backyard, or wherever you are, whenever you turn an appreciative and reflective eye.

“But What IS it?”

One response that I often get when people look at my abstract photographs is that they ask “But what IS it?” This is a very natural question and sometimes, with some images, I respond directly by telling what the original referent is while, when asked about other pictures, I like to keep things open and ask, “Well, what do you think it is?” This opens a discussion of shared imagination.

Abstract photographs often carry a sense of mystery that invokes associations similar to those that come with a dream image. By naming the specific subject of the photograph,

the understanding tends to become concrete, losing a sense of mystery, thus collapsing the imaginal space. So with photographs like these (Figs. 21, 22), I prefer to let the viewer struggle with the unknown in a way that perpetuates an immersion in mystery. Earlier, I mentioned that abstract photography is about revealing things in a way that opens the viewer to seeing common objects with a new sense of perception; it is not necessary in this process to show all the details of what the object really looks like. Sometimes by omitting some details and making an object harder to recognize, the mystery draws the viewer in and stimulates attention beyond the literal object to the process of really seeing through to the imaginal; stopping with the concrete object short circuits the potential for the aliveness that comes into play when the unknown is privileged as an element of the viewer's interaction with the work of art.

Fig. 21

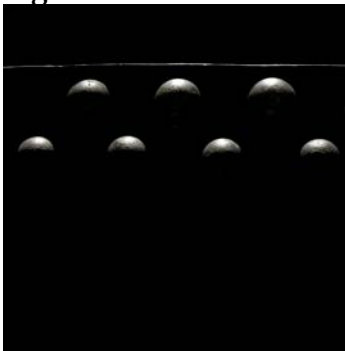
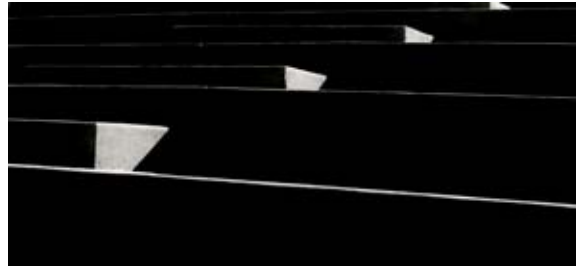


Fig. 22



Here are some images where I like to keep a sense of mystery about what the subject really is. (Figs. 23, 24, 25)

Fig. 23



Fig. 24

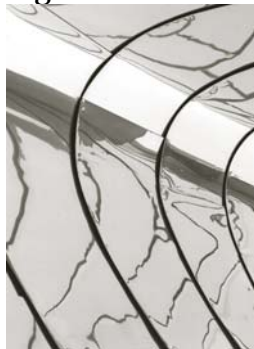


Fig. 25



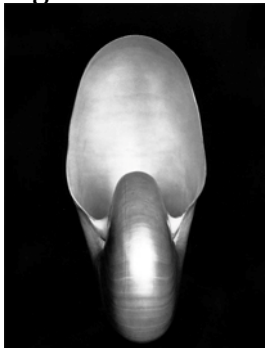
Sometimes other artists give very concrete names to their photographs, which I think interferes with the process of projection, and with what the image might evoke in the viewer's imagination. For example, take two famous photographs by Edward Weston, with their sensuous curves reminiscent of a human body. The names *Pepper* (Fig. 26) and *Nautilus Shell* (Fig. 27) keep the image too anchored to ordinary reality, in my opinion. After all, these photographs are not just about a pepper, or a nautilus shell, there is also a connection to the world of imagination, mystery, and the soul. In my

photographs, I generally use more symbolic words for titles that either suggest a connection to the world of imagination, or at least do not discourage that connection.

Fig. 26



Fig. 27



For example, I call my series of wire photographs (Figs. 8, 9, 10). The name refers not just to the formal nature of the photographs' compositions, but also to musical compositions, for the music that I hear when I see the wires, so reminiscent of strings on musical instruments or the lines of a score.

Different Ways of Seeing

I have previously noted how important it is to really look beyond the manifest object to see in depth with psychological mindedness and I would like to further pursue this theme here. I believe there are three different levels of seeing, *ordinary sight*, *true seeing* and *creative imagination*. The first level of seeing, *ordinary sight*, is what we normally do every day when we look around as we go about our lives. We see lots of things, but unless they are novel or unusual, our brains just tune them out; we tend to accept our daily environment with little reflective function. Although such inclinations are adaptive and necessary, we risk missing the value and beauty in the ordinary and the potential mysteries that are so close at hand, if reflective consciousness can be employed. Moving at a quick pace, it is all too easy to remain in the fog of ordinary sight and miss the deeper qualities of our surroundings. For example, one might notice a pretty tree and not pursue threads of interest that could lead to appreciation of details and subtleties that could open the possibility of enriching aesthetic experiences that come with genuine interaction among the mind, body and surround.

By slowing down, one has the opportunity to really pay attention to the tree and a myriad of fascinating aspects come forward. Awareness dawns and you as observer realize that this living tree is so much more than a cartoon-like, big, round, lollipop shape reminiscent of what young children draw. The branches move out into space at amazing angles, and there is a wonderful contrast between the thick and thin branches and between straight and curved lines. I call this kind of awareness, the second level of seeing or *true seeing* where we perceive things as they actually are in this world whereby we become aware of the details and textures and little things that we usually overlook. This does not imply getting a supposedly objective view of reality, because our perceptions are always colored by personal emotional states and psychological projections so pure objectivity is impossible. From my view, *true seeing* does not mean looking into a deeper level of reality; rather, it has to do with seeing what is actually

there in front of your eyes, instead of going about in that fog of *ordinary sight*. This is what is referred to as mindful presence these days in psychology. It is what happens when we are mindfully present to our bodies and senses and see things more for the way they are. Jungians might think of this as employing the sensate function.

Sufism has a wonderful metaphor for the problem of how to really see what is around us- they talk of various “veils” that cover our sight, as in this quote:

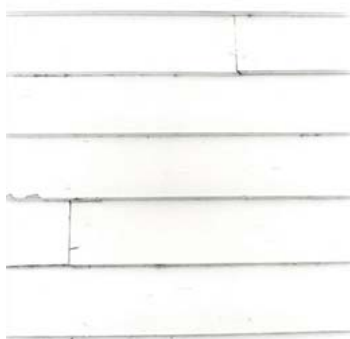
The most pressing of tasks... is to lift the veil that prevents the self from seeing itself and others.

(Chittick 1998, p. 120)

While Chittick says that you cannot understand things around you until you understand yourself, I would say that it can actually work in both directions. By really seeing what is around us, we can start to understand it better, and use that as a means to recognize parts of ourselves. For example, after working on photographs of electric wires for a while, I better understood the part of myself that related to the wires’ lyric rationality and simple grace.

As an example of the veils that cover our sight, I remember a day that I was photographing some old buildings in Sacramento, California. I came upon a house with old, white shingles. I was really drawn to the quiet, meditative lines and rhythms of the shingles, and made this photograph (Fig. 28). After I was done, I noticed a woman on the sidewalk staring at me. “Do you always take pictures of nothing?” she asked. “It is hardly nothing, there is so much here,” I replied and brought her over to show her what I was seeing. She just did not get it, though, and shook her head as she went on her way.

Fig. 28



One of the roles of art is to help others see what is actually around us, as Paul Klee wonderfully said,

Art does not reproduce the visible, rather it makes it visible.

(as quoted in Edschmid 1920, p. 28)

If we as artists can lift the veils that cover our own sight, we can try to share what we see with others, so they might perhaps lift their own veils as well. It does not always work, but we still have to try.

For many years I was happy making abstract photographs with just true sight showing things as they actually are, like figures 29, 30, and 31. I love how they show the rhythm and music of the tree branches, and the first of them is named *Gymnopedie* after the famous piano pieces by Erik Satie. But I could not help feeling that something was missing, that it did not fully capture how I feel when I look at the bare tree branches. When I look at them, I feel awe and wonder at the infinite complexity, the overlapping rhythms and movement and music. There is a solitude of the trees as they lay in wait during the winter, not dead, but resting until the creative energy can burst forth again after the winter has passed.

Fig. 29



Fig. 30



Fig. 31



I realized that I was imagining a kind of photograph that could show more of that feeling, showing not just the visible world, but some of the invisible world as well. After a lot of trial and error, I ended up with a new series of photographs, called *Memoria* (Fig. 19).

Unlike with true seeing, this image does not look as much like a tree literally does in this world; instead it shows a deeper level, some of the essence inside. This way of seeing is what some call the mind's eye, or visualization, or creative imagination, as it is referred to in the Sufi tradition. I call this the third level of seeing, *creative imagination*. This type of perception combines what is actually out there in the world with inner imagination, creating something new and different similar to Jung's transcendent function that emerges through a conjunction of the two.

Ansel Adams described it this way:

The visualization of a photograph involves the intuitive search for meaning, shape, form, texture, and the projection of the image-format on the subject. The image forms in the mind—is visualized...The creative artist is constantly roving the worlds without, and creating new worlds within.

(Adams 1996, p. 78)

Ibn 'Arabi, the great Sufi mystic from the 12th century, talked about different levels of seeing as the light of eyesight or unveiling, which corresponds to what I call *true seeing*, and the light of insight or knowledge, which corresponds to creative imagination.

The sensory and suprasensory lights are ranked in layers, some of which are more excellent than others

(Chittick 1998, p. 160)

Henry Corbin, one of the greatest interpreters of Ibn 'Arabi's work, called this higher level of sight, creative imagination, or active imagination:

The visible which cannot be seen... is perceptible only by the Active Imagination... A mystic perception is required... to perceive [the deeper reality] through the figures which they manifest...

(Corbin 1989, p. 189)

The 'place' of this encounter is... in the manner of a bridge joining the two banks of a river. ... A method of understanding which transmutes sensory data and rational concepts into symbols.

(Ibid.)

By the way, I should point out that what Corbin means by 'active imagination' is not quite the same as the Jungian sense of a dialogue with the unconscious. Both involve an interaction with the imaginal world, with the psychoid, but the Jungian type of active imagination has more ego involvement, so the ego can have a dialogue with the unconscious. To avoid confusion, I will use the term "creative imagination" as the name for the type of seeing we use to perceive the imaginal world.

Thinking of Corbin's quote about the imaginal world as a bridge joining the two banks of a river, it is fascinating how a similar metaphor was also used by Hildegard von Bingen, the 12th century Christian mystic, who believed that the five senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch), are a bridge that connects us to the eternal (Schipperges 1997, p. 10).

Going back to the *Memoria* series of photographs, now that I could imagine what I wanted to do, to connect with the deeper essence of the trees, with the symbolic and the eternal, I needed to actually create the photographs. After listening to a lot of classical music that uses "looping" techniques to build up complex textures of sound by sampling small parts of music, I got the inspiration to do something similar with photographs, using multiple exposures. Since my camera did not have a built-in way to do multiple exposures, I had to come up with my own process to make it possible. This photograph, for example, combines together four different exposures of the same tree, from slightly different angles.

The *Memoria* series came out of a difficult period when I was going through a number of personal losses. I was thinking about how memories get built up in layers as you think about something again and again. In the same way, the multiple exposures in each

photograph get built up layer by layer, all done in the camera rather than using Photoshop, to reflect the spontaneous, alchemical, and intuitive processes of the psyche and the imagination. I will often have an idea of what kind of image I would like to make, but you never know how it will turn out, and there are always surprises and mysteries. Quite often, what I end up with is much more satisfying than what I had originally intended to do. (Figs. 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37)

Fig. 32



Fig. 33



Fig. 34



Fig. 35



Fig. 36

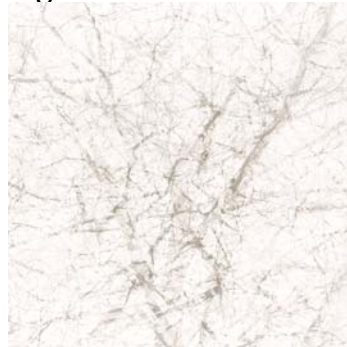


Fig. 37



At a gallery opening where I was showing this series, a young man who grew up in Maine told me that these photographs really capture how the trees feel to him, even though they are not how they literally look. When I was first working on this series, though, part of me felt conflicted about not representing how the trees literally look. In the modern Western world, we tend to highly value rational thought and supposedly objective perception, while dismissing other forms of seeing and knowing. Just as some people think of dreams as mere fantasy, they look down on so-called “figments of the imagination,” and say you are just seeing things. Even for those of us who are not so dismissive of imagination, there can still be a lingering attitude that imagination is just in your head, it is in no sense real, and is somehow less important than physical reality.

Many abstract artists, however, feel that what you imagine is real in some sense. Josef Albers, for example, who painted the famous series *Homage to the Square* (1959), said:

For me, abstraction is real, probably more real than nature
(1996, p.45).

Constantin Brancusi, known for his abstract sculptures like *Bird in Space* (date), said:

That which they call abstract is the most realistic, because what is real is not the exterior but the idea, the essence of things
(as quoted in Design & Art Magazine, 2013).

Jungians, of course, know that the contents of the psyche have their own level of reality, as in this quote from Jung:

The place or the medium of realization is neither mind nor matter, but that intermediate realm of subtle reality which can be adequately expressed only by the symbol.

(Jung 1968, para., 400)

In analytical psychology, this level of reality is referred to as the psychoid, which is the psychic realm between the conscious and the unconscious. It is the place where “both psychic image and physical instinct mix together, where they unite” (Samuels et al., 1986 p. 122); it is the place of archetypes (Adams and Duncan 2003, p., 29) and the collective unconscious (Rossi 2004 p. 150), and the world of shamans (Mann 2006). What page number for Mann?

Imaginal Worlds

This level of reality is also recognized in the Sufi tradition, in the works of great philosophers like Avicenna and Ibn ‘Arabi, from the 11th and 12th centuries. According to Sufism, when you imagine something, it is an actual act of creation, and that is why they call it creative imagination. Just as God created the universe by imagining it, in the same way you are creating things when you imagine them. You are not creating things made of solid matter, though, but things made of subtle matter, a mixture of matter and spirit. These things created by imagination exist in a mysterious intermediate world between our physical world and the completely non-physical world of the spirit. Like the psychoid in analytical psychology, this in-between world is the realm of symbols, dreams, myths, visions, revelations, and mysteries. It is not a world made up of ideas, but of sensory perceptions, where things are seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled, in the same sense that you can see, hear, and touch things in your dreams (Corbin 1994, p. 70). You cannot use your ordinary sight or true sight, though, you have to use your creative imagination, going back to the three types of seeing I talked about earlier.

Some scholars of Sufism describe the intermediate world like this:

The *mundus imaginalis* [or imaginal world] is the realm where invisible realities become visible, and corporeal things are spiritualized.

(Chittick 1989, p. ix)

The imagination, magical intermediary between thought and being, incarnation of thought in image, and presence of the image in being.

(Koyré 1955, p. 60)

[The beings created by Active Imagination] subsist with an independent existence [of their own type] in the intermediate world.

(Corbin 1969, p. 183)

Corbin uses the term “imaginal world” to avoid the connotations of the word “imaginary,” which would make you think of an unreal fantasy world. After all, not everything you imagine has the same level of reality. If I tell myself to think of something really weird, I might imagine a hamburger with wings, but that is just a fantasy, it is not part of the imaginal world. Similarly, if I tell myself to imagine a purple elephant, that is not part of the imaginal world either. Since those are “premeditated or provoked by a conscious process of the mind” (Corbin 1969, p. 220): Corbin would say they are just on the plane of what he calls “Conjoined Imagination,” rather than on the higher plane of the imaginal world.

On the other hand, when things you imagine “come to the mind spontaneously like dreams (or daydreams)” (Corbin 1969, p.220), those things are in the imaginal world. When you see something with creative imagination, it is somewhat like a dream, vision, or reverie, you are seeing something from the imaginal world. And so, when someone sees an abstract photograph and asks, “Well what IS it?”, my response is that the photograph is not only a tree: it is a bridge to the imaginal world; it is a combination of matter and spirit.

While Jungians are generally pretty receptive to the idea that the psychoid and the imaginal world are in some sense real, it is a hard notion for many modern Westerners to accept. We are used to solid things that we can see and touch being real, like chairs and trees and mountains, while the things we imagine or see in dreams are totally different. But just because they are different does not mean they are not real. After all, we believe that many things are real even though they cannot be seen with the naked eye, like infrared light or the God particle. As long as you can detect it somehow or see it have an effect on something, then you believe it is real. Sometimes you just need a different tool to help you see it, like to see infrared light you will need infrared goggles, or to find the God particle you will need your friendly neighborhood large hadron collider. It is the same thing with the psychoid and the imaginal world - we cannot see them with our ordinary sight, but we can see them with creative imagination, which we can all do in our dreams and reveries. Since we can see it, and it definitely has an effect on us, we might as well accept that the imaginal world is real. When I first heard of imagination as creating something real, and connecting with the in-between world of dreams, symbols and visions, it immediately resonated with me, and helped me understand better what I was doing with my abstract photographs, and helped me value the imaginal world just as much as the physical world around us. However, for people who still do not believe that the imaginal world is real, I would encourage them to just think of it as a metaphor - as long as we value imagination and our dialogue with the unconscious, that is the most important thing.

Now, going back to what the imaginal world is, I talked about how it is a marriage or conjunction of the inner and outer worlds. So, the things in that world are also a mixture of spirit and matter, and some may have a larger amount of one world in them than of the other one:

The soul's 'storehouse of imagination' is full of images derived from both the outward and the inward worlds. Each image is a mixture of subtlety and density, luminosity and darkness, clarity and murkiness.

(Chittick 1994 p. 72)

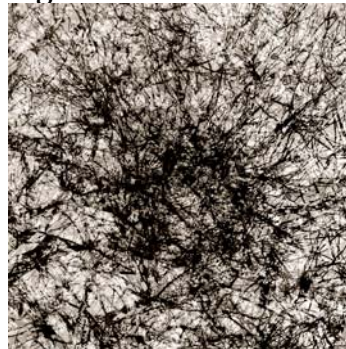
This goes back to the theme of the psyche and the city, or the psyche and our surroundings in general. Photographs are always a combination of the two, and some draw more from the surroundings while others draw more from the psyche. Ones that draw more from the surroundings are more representational, while ones that draw more from the psyche are more abstract.

For example, *Memoria #8* has more of the external world in it, and more closely resembles outer reality (Fig. 38), while *Memoria #19* on the other hand has more of the inner world, more closely resembling some inner reality rather than the actual trees I was photographing (Fig. 39). This photograph is particularly interesting to me, because I was actually photographing two thin trees next to each other, but from how I rotated the camera between each of the multiple exposures, the image ended up forming this dark concentration of energy, like a nest or a gnarled ball. It was really a co-creation between the trees and me, a combination of us, which neither of us could have done alone. In fact, when seeing the image in the camera, the energy was so powerful that I felt as if I had seen an eclipse of the sun; I could not look at it too long without becoming overwhelmed by its intensity. From this example, you can see that the imaginal world can come from various sources- not just from your own subconscious, but sometimes from a deeper source, whether you call it a muse, the Self, or God. Moments of conjunction with the imaginal world cannot be predicted; we can only wait with openness to its inspiration.

Fig. 38



Fig. 39



Before I move on from this series of photographs, I should mention that I am simplifying the philosophy of Sufism in various ways, because it is really complicated

with many subtle distinctions and various invisible worlds. For example, I am only concentrating on two of the five worlds that they identify, our ordinary sensory world, and the imaginal world, and am not really talking about the world of conjoined imagination, the world of spirits or the divine world because my photography is focused on trying to show the imaginal world.

As I worked more with photographs of trees, I began to be drawn to images that are even more abstract, more part of my inner world, and that led to my latest series of photographs which I call *Multiple Visions*. These works (figs. 40, 41, 42) follow a generally similar process of building up multiple exposures of trees, but they are in color, obviously, and I let the branches break down even further, almost into an all-over pattern or color field, while still keeping some signs of the original structure of the trees.

Fig. 40



Fig. 41

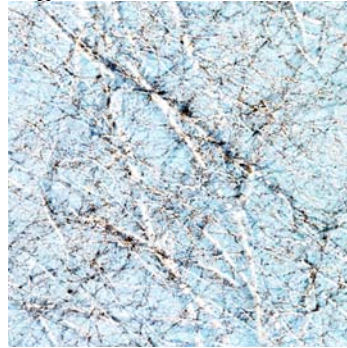
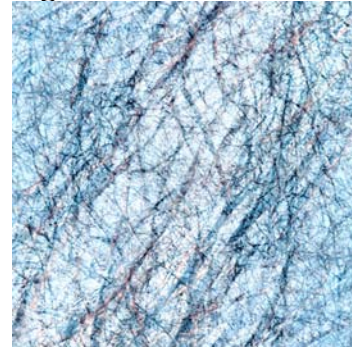


Fig. 42



These images move onward from the winter of the *Memoria* series, and show the life bursting forth in other seasons, like the delicate blossoms of springtime (Figs. 43, 44, 45). As I worked on co-creating these photographs, I was very aware of all the life being co-created around me, between the constant buzzing of bees and the heady sweetness of the flowers. Even though you cannot see the bees in the photographs, I hope some feeling comes through of abundant life.

Fig. 43



Fig. 44

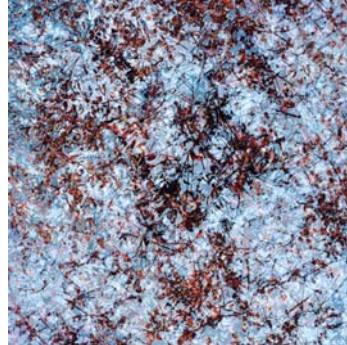
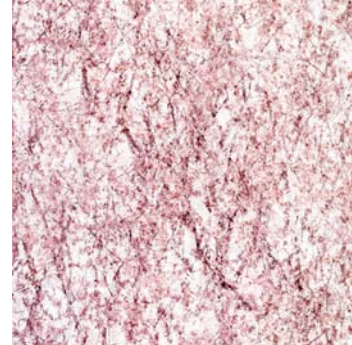


Fig. 45



Other photographs try to show the feeling of wonder I have when I look up at the dazzling kaleidoscope of a canopy of summer leaves overhead (Figs. 46, 47, 48). The

dappled light in between the leaves, a thousand colors of green... By the way, the name *Multiple Visions* came to me as a way of combining together the photographic technique of multiple exposures, plus the multiple ways of seeing that I have talked about here, and of the visions that may be revealed in the imaginal world.

Fig. 46



Fig. 47

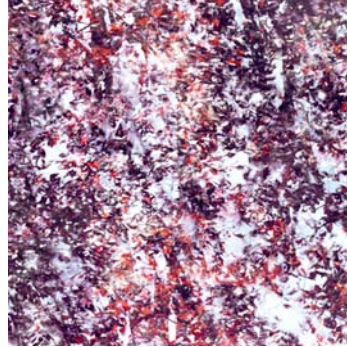
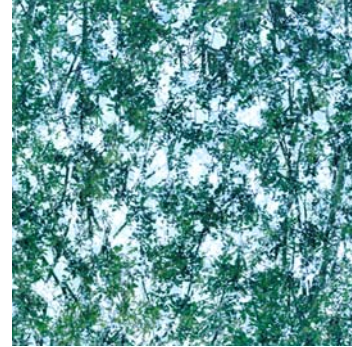


Fig. 48



Active Imagination

As you have probably noticed, like many artists I tend to work in series of related images. It lets me concentrate on specific subject matter for an extended period of time, so I can interact with the subject more deeply and really get to know it. One way that analytical psychology has been helpful to me as an artist has been to think of working on a series as a form of active imagination in the Jungian sense, that is, as a meditation technique where you engage in a dialogue with figures from your unconscious. That dialogue happens in the imaginal world or psychoid, creating a bridge between your ego and the unconscious.

In my photography, one example of my process of active imagination is a series called *Writing the Divine*, which is the last series I would like to show (Figs. 49, 50, 51).

Fig. 49

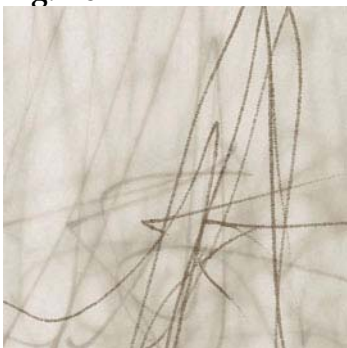
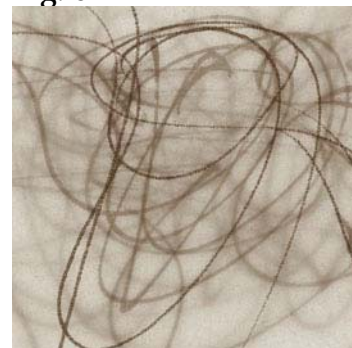


Fig. 50



Fig. 51



Before I started work on this series, I was happily working on some other images, when suddenly I had the idea to do close-up photographs of writing, something I had never photographed before. I was intrigued, but did not know how it would work, or what it would end up looking like. Still, I embraced the unknown, engaged in a dialogue with it,

and tried to just see where it would lead. After a number of attempts and changes in direction, the process of creative imagination led me deeper into the imaginal world. Since I am a thinking type, it was at times difficult to use an intuitive approach, but I am glad I stuck with it. After all, the mysteries of the imaginal world are far richer than any images the rational intellect could put together.

In this series, I took various phrases related to spirituality, things that were deeply meaningful to me in one way or another, and wrote them over and over again on translucent sheets of paper. I stacked the sheets on top of one another, and photographed them so you could see the layers showing through, as in this photograph where you can see a close-up of the letter “O” written a number of times, with other lighter layers showing through behind it. Writing the phrases over and over by hand was a very meditative process, and let me really concentrate on the meaning of the phrases, which I chose for their relevance to what I was experiencing at the time. In the *Present*, for example, I show part of the Buddhist phrase, “Form is emptiness; emptiness is form” (Fig. 50). *Batter my Heart* is from John Donne’s *Holy Sonnet* (Fig. 52). Each photograph intentionally shows only a small part of the writing, so you cannot always make out individual letters, much less what the whole phrase says. Plus, some of the phrases are in other languages that I speak like Russian, so there may be even less chance of literal legibility in those cases.

The series is basically a meditation on how to express the inexpressible. I can say something about God or spirituality to someone, but that does not mean that they will understand it. Over the centuries as teachings get passed down from person to person, layers get built up of interpretation, reinterpretation, and misinterpretation. In the same way, in these photographs each layer builds upon what came before, adding to it but also partially obscuring it, like a manuscript that has been written on again and again, a palimpsest.

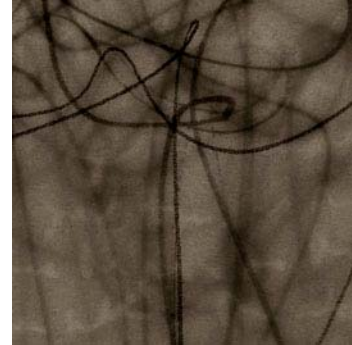
Fig. 52



Fig. 53



Fig. 54



As Karen Armstrong says in her book *The Case for God (year)*, the divine cannot be understood through reason and language. We need to try to understand by moving beyond that into the space beyond words. While even the most complex words are not expressive enough to describe God, on the other hand even the simplest word is full of so much meaning, as in Fig. 53.

While this series has a lot in common with my previous series, in terms of composition, rhythm, and tonality, it is the farthest I have gone in representing the inner world through photographs. So in a sense, they are my most abstract images, though they still have some connection to the external world through my handwriting. Writing, and words in general, are sometimes seen as belonging to the imaginal world in that they are an intermediary carrying ideas back and forth between the external and internal worlds. . We sometimes think of words as hard-and-fast, well-defined concepts, but given how often misunderstandings occur, and how words fail to describe the ineffable, I think of words as shimmering silver fish swimming in a river. You can try to follow them for a while as they perhaps point the way, but at some point you will lose sight of them, and you will need to just jump in, and see where the river takes you.

Fig. 55

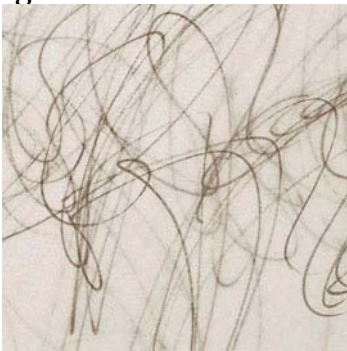


Fig. 56



Fig. 57



Conclusion

In conclusion, I have talked about how abstract photographs serve as bridges that connect the ordinary world with the imaginal world. Like all photographs, they are necessarily tied to the ordinary world around us, while abstraction helps bring in the mysterious qualities of the imaginal world, and creates a conjunction of matter and spirit. I would like to emphasize the importance of different ways of seeing, and the reality of the imaginal world, are common to all types of art. There are many different ways to show the realities of the imaginal world, not just in photography, but also with painting, sculpture, storytelling, dance, or any art form. However you want to do it, the most important things are to follow your creative imagination, and let your psyche mix with the city, or whatever your surroundings are.

Lifting the veils so that we can truly see things in this world, or use creative imagination to catch glimpses of the mysterious imaginal world, we have a responsibility to share our experiences. That is true whether you are an artist, an analyst, or whomever. Like shamans, we all need to try to bring more consciousness into this world by building bridges to the imaginal world.

Endnotes

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