

*Eye of Faith, David Parker*

## The Abstract Unconscious in Painting

David Parker

*“...it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified...” (Nietzsche. F. 1872)*

### **The Abstract Unconscious in Painting**

I will begin by stating that, for me, what takes place in the studio, and subsequent reflections on the activity and its outcomes, appears to be deeply connected to a vital personal need to engage in some form of highly altered state of mind. Such a need is curiously demanding and inevitably complex in terms of potential meaning - being intensely bound up with formal visual issues and imaginative responses to the developing image.

What is becoming clear, as my experience and conscious understanding develops, is that both process and product appear to be driven by inner (perhaps unconscious) needs - needs that are essentially manifested through highly concentrated perceptual fantasies. Such fantasies on face value seem to be, in effect, what I will call “hermetic constructs” - having no clear symbolic connection to the external world as such or, apparently, any shared cultural connection beyond the obvious one of earlier experiments in modernist abstraction.

In this sense the work appears to be, in practice, intensely introverted – perhaps even bordering on the autistic. That said, the imagery does seem to carry a level of aesthetic meaning and value, a value rooted somewhere other than any associations that might be made with shared, externally validated, sources of recognition. What then perhaps needs to be addressed from the outset, concerns what such implied inner needs might be, as it seems that these needs drive the initial intention to physically create an image and to act this out imaginatively through a highly specific process of change and development.

## **The Contemporary Painter**

Let me begin by considering what I believe to be the greatest challenge to a contemporary painter living through an age of increased technology and industrial mass-production. Never before has a painter had to navigate through such a diversity and multiplicity of images as those currently available to a globalised visual consciousness. Therefore, what strategies might a painter adopt in the attempt to provide an aesthetic space - one that points us somewhere other than that which is circumscribed by the familiar and instantly accessible? This is of course assuming that the initial intention is stimulated by a desire to find effective ways of visualizing authentic expressions of the human condition. Either, such diverse imagery can be manipulated and reconfigured in order to reveal a potential meaning through deliberate quotation, parody or even absurdity (as much post modern art has demonstrated) or one can reject all such references and turn to some form of inner imagery generated through free-form processes and chance occurrences.

Artists have, of course, long used such processes in order to tap into and liberate imagination. In *Art and Illusion* (2002), art historian Ernst Gombrich discusses such processes at some length within his chapter "The Image in the Clouds" referring to Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) and the English landscape painter Alexander Cozens (1717-1786) both of whom advocated the development of imaginative landscapes from inkblots, stained walls or uneven coloured stones (Gombrich 2002 pp. 154-169). Many such approaches were also heavily employed within both Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism in order to engage and stimulate creative imagination.

For the contemporary painter, looking for a way to engage imagination in order to reveal what might best be described as an inner landscape - one that largely avoids drawing on the use of pre-existing visual models - it is necessary to adopt a strategy that manages to successfully avoid simply repeating past, culturally absorbed, modernist forms of expression. Any such repetition would simply weld the imaginative space of the work to a pre-existent historical point, thus negating any potential contemporary meaning. In effect, the potency of such an image would be compromised by its literal connection to a given historical and cultural index. What then is needed is a method that engages imagination through an active and open-ended process, one that adopts strategies and techniques from the past but one that also attempts to push the development of the work formally and aesthetically into potentially vital forms and structures.



***Figure 1 Untitled, David Parker***

In my attempts to do this, keeping actively and imaginatively involved in the space of the painting is crucial – avoiding any conscious desire to close down the imagination too soon by tying the imagery to overtly obvious figurative expressions. In this respect, my paintings effectively grow from this pressing need to try and find a way to re-imagine such an aesthetic space – one that does not overtly embrace references to culturally validated sources and yet is capable of carrying meaning and value at an unconscious level. Implicit in this approach is the assumption that psychological life is structured around two modes of being, one conscious and the other unconscious. As Freud has shown us, by definition, what is unconscious is not directly available to consciousness. However, both Freudian and Jungian psychologies suggest that what we experience in consciousness is inflected with and shaped by the unconscious and that addressing the needs of unconscious life can be fundamental to aesthetic appreciation.

Starting from this premise, my painting is an attempt to imagine my way through the labyrinth of unconscious form production. Lines, marks, colours etc. begin life without meaning or context and these are slowly and painstakingly brought into consciousness and formed into a structural matrix - one that aims to reveal and integrate unconscious complexes with highly structured conscious assimilations.

On reflection, the paintings appear to contain both personal and trans-personal aspects. The imagery largely avoids direct reference to “things” and yet seems to be informed by subliminal experiences of said things. The compacted and fragmented space does not encourage the eye to settle in any one space or on any one form, rather, we are stimulated to move in, out and around the space in a

trance-like, hypnotic state, akin to daydreaming – a suspension of ego perhaps as the dream image takes hold and draws us deeper into other worlds.

I am interested in making paintings that have the potential to act as gateways to those aspects of psychological life that remain largely unrecognized or suppressed from ordinary consciousness. In this respect, for me, they are images of transcendence in the Jungian sense i.e. capable of raising consciousness by integrating this with the unconscious and its archetypal foundations.

### **Painting and Psychology**

Clearly, I am drawing into this analysis certain key concepts from psychology in order to elucidate my understanding of the practice of painting and it would perhaps be helpful to the reader for me to make clear how I use these borrowed ideas in this context. Before I do this, however, I wish to make it clear that, for me, the actual practice of painting is not in itself structured around psychological theories – I do not make paintings that simply illustrate Freudian or Jungian ideas or images. Such psychological ideas do of course provide a framework in which to explore meaning theoretically, but the activity and language of painting will essentially always remain discreetly beyond any potentially reductive interpretations and, for me, this is its strength.

As an empirical and essentially plastic medium, painting follows its own laws - laws that provide imagination with a material basis in which to express what is, in effect, a state of constant “being” and “becoming” for the active psyche. There is a clear parallel here to Jung’s active imagination – though this is critically embedded in the materially based activity of painting. What psychology provides for painting is a reflective mirror, one in which we can study, at a

distance, the movements of imagination as it works on and through the practice in relation to both the individual and the collective psyche. In order to do this, it is necessary to try to unpack the usefulness and appropriateness of these key concepts in psychology in order to see how these might map onto a deeper theoretical understanding of the potential meaning and value of painting.

### **Conscious and Unconscious in Painting**

*Conscious* and *unconscious* are concepts used in reflective thought in order to understand what moves and conditions our inner lives. So, it would seem advantageous to begin by exploring more specifically the meaning of these concepts and their relevance to an activity like painting.

To my understanding, the terms *conscious* and *unconscious* refer to conditions or states of mind functioning within the psychic structure as a whole. This being so, if consciousness consists of the mental contents that a given subject is able to grasp with a measure of reassurance regarding their temporal perceptual apparatus, i.e. place immediate experience in relation to available models of reality, then the unconscious embraces all those mental contents that remain slippery, uncertain, multifaceted, yet seem to be commanding, vital and fundamental to an experiencing psyche. Logically, we can deduce the existence of unconscious modalities from our inability to provide a consistent, rational account of all that affects us intellectually and emotionally; hence the need for symbolization and, as Jung shows us, the symbolic points to the, as yet, unclear or unknown.

In relation to painting both as process and product, what we think and feel and the intensity of aesthetic engagement, is proportional to the depth of its unconscious content, and by implication, its imaginative texture - that which

cannot be fixed in meaning and yet is capable of moving the viewer psychologically away from the temporal (human) present and towards the universal (divine) or archetypal constant.

Culturally, and in a different though related context, this state of being in the world is discussed in the work of Mircea Eliade in his *Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954/1991) in which he discusses ideas on ancient man's relationship to the world as cyclical rather than linear in perspective. Such a view of the world follows a model based on repetitions of the same archetypal constants – constants that, at a cosmic level, take us out of human progressive time and into a supra-human or divine state of constant repetition. Eliade (1991, p. xiv) is careful to explain that he uses the word *archetype* in a different way than Jung, but I'm not so sure that there really is such a difference regarding the implicit psychological meaning. Eliade states that by "archetype" he is referring to archaic man's models for his behavior and institutions - that they are "... 'revealed' to him at the beginning of time, [that] consequently, they are regarded as having a superhuman and 'transcendental' origin..." (Eliade, 1991, p xiv). Eliade states that "... [he] was not referring to the archetypes described by Professor C.G. Jung... for Professor Jung, the archetypes are structures of the collective unconscious.." (ibid). I am therefore suggesting that the meaning of archetype is perhaps at root the same even though Eliade stresses a different meaning.

Contemporary perspectives of Jungian and post-Jungian psychology show that a move towards the archetypal suggests a move towards the imaginal – towards the primacy of imagination and its images and away from linear, directed thinking as expressed in the prosaic language of discourse.

## **Imagination and the Imaginal**

My use of the word *imaginal* comes from reading post-Jungian psychology and the work of the Islamic scholar Henry Corbin. As I understand it, there is a clear dissociation of the word “imagination” from mere unreal fancy or fantasy and any associated negative connotations. Roberts Avens (2003, p. 38) sites Corbin (Corbin 1972, p9 cf.pp.7,15):

Henry Corbin, arguing against the equation of “imaginary” with “unreal,” emphasizes that in the Islamic tradition, the world of the image, the *mundus imaginalis*, is a primordial phenomenon (*Urphanomen*) situated as an intermediary between the world of the senses and the intelligible world. The mode of being of this world constitutes its own “matter”; it “is” exactly in the way in which it appears. The comparison, regularly used by the Arabic authors, is the mode in which images appear and subsist in a mirror (Avens 2003, p. 38).

Avens goes on to quote Corbin (1972, p9 cf.pp.7,15): “... The material substance of the mirror ... is not the substance of the Image... The substance (of the Image) is simply the ‘place of its appearance.’ ” Further, Avens points us to the roots of Western Romanticism and Coleridge, in particular, for further comment on the primacy of imagination in the understanding of a truly “real” perceptual relationship to the world. He notes that “... creative imagination is essentially vital, which for Coleridge meant that it is a way of discovering a deeper truth about the world...” (Avens 2003 p. 18).



**Figure 2 David Parker in the studio.**

Now, for the painter, each moment of the act of painting provides the imaginative “place” for the appearance of the image and this place changes constantly as the painting develops.

Therefore, the material substance of the painting and its subtle relationship to the painter, unlike a mirror, contains the imaginative space. A painted image, as a free agent of potential

meaning, is intimately connected to, and projected by, its specific material properties - being an extension of the painter’s psyche - and in this sense it is a very concrete manifestation of imagination. In this respect, it is likely that a painter occupies a space similar to that of the alchemist – a topic I have discussed in more depth elsewhere (Parker 2008). Imagination, then, is perhaps critical to all life affirming relationships with the world including, as Hillman shows us, all the messy, painful and disturbing aspects (Hillman 1975/92, pp 55-112). In the act of creation – in this case painting - imagination moves through many varieties of experience stimulated by the marks and colours and their organization. At their very best, such experiences promote deep psychological responses capable of raising consciousness by signaling, in Jungian terms, the archetypal core of

being which, having an unconscious source, contains profound significance in its long term impact on the subjective psyche.

### **Abstraction in Painting**

This brings me back to the title of this paper and a key aspect of this inquiry – the use and meaning of the term *abstraction* in relation to painting and the unconscious. The term *abstraction* in the context of modern and post-modern painting (and using the word at its most basic level) simply denotes any painted image that has either:

(a) no representational elements contained within it as intended subject matter or

(b) recognizable and intended representational imagery that has however, for formal and/or expressive reasons, been manipulated, distorted and exaggerated in order to better convey a particular psychological and emotional relationship to the act of painting and the human condition.

It can be seen that neither of these simple descriptions are really sufficient to describe the full content and meaning of the generic term *abstraction* so further elaboration is necessary. An added complication is introduced by the tendency to bracket together the words *representational* and *figurative* within much art criticism.

Wilhelm Worringer in his pioneering and hugely influential work *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908) argues that representational art derives its aesthetic from man's self confidence in relation to the objective world as perceived in nature – for example, as seen in Ancient Greek or Renaissance art. Conversely, abstract art (for Worringer typified by Egyptian, Primitive or Modernist Expressionist art) signifies an inner insecurity in relation to the

natural world and a desire to seek spiritual sustenance and transcendent states of being through the formalizing and configuring of another world - one of non-naturalistic and absolute purity. In effect, his argument stands on theories of psychological security and insecurity in relation to an indifferent natural world – indifferent simply because what happens in the world beyond the human is, in its indifference, deeply troubling unless mediated and mitigated by ritual acts of aesthetic transformation as seen within both art and religion. As Nietzsche shows us, “...it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified...” (Nietzsche 1993, p. 32).

Worringer’s thesis is that abstraction refers to all art expressions that are non-naturalistic – including geometric stylizations (e.g. Arabic) as well as figurative stylizations (e.g. Medieval, Byzantine). His general thesis can also be applied to Modernist experiments in pure abstraction as seen within the work of key painters such as Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian,



**Figure 3 Things Not Seen, David Parker**

Barnett Newman or Mark Rothko. According to Worringer, what seems to be fundamental to the urge towards abstraction in general, in this case in relation to

the plastic arts, is a desire – perhaps even a compulsive need – to access and hence find a measure of psychological security and wholeness via an inner image rather than an outer image. Such an image does not have its roots in the directly observed natural world - Worringer writes,

... the urge to abstraction is the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world; in a religious respect it corresponds to a strongly transcendental tinge to all notions. We might describe this state as an immense spiritual dread of space...(Worringer, 1997, pg. 15)

Worringer suggests that rationalistic developments in consciousness – meaning in particular the Greco-Roman foundations of Western thought: “...pressed back this instinctive fear conditioned by man’s feeling of being lost in the universe...” (*ibid*) and hence developed an art of optimism and empathy towards the natural and organic external world of three dimensional space. However, in cultures other than those developed from such an optimistic and self-confident view of man’s centeredness in relation to the external world, art developed a distinctly non-naturalistic form based on abstract stylizations that effectively negated three dimensional space – at least as far as the painted and drawn image was concerned.

Worringer’s ideas, when applied to the development of pure abstraction within modern industrialized societies, indicates the self same loss of confidence in the confusion of the external world, an alienation from the given, and a retreat to the inner world of spiritual purity. In such a move, the painter was effectively attempting to reanimate the archetypal core of being through the vehicle of a plastic medium, where what is presented visually provides a space in which to lose the self within the safe boundaries of such a ritual act of creation. The

paradox is that an implied archetypal core – the ultimate spiritual reality - of this “internal necessity” as I think Kandinsky called it, can only be suggested and never actually known – the artwork being the messenger though perhaps not the actual (archetypal) message.

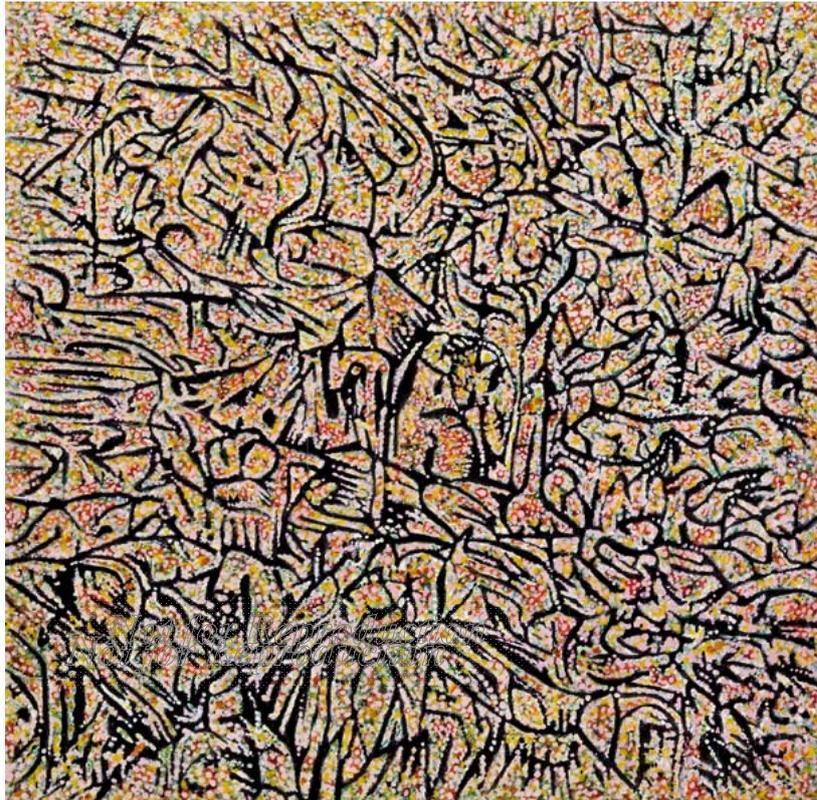
The contemporary painter Ian McKeever cites the eighth century theologian John of Damascus regarding such a move to abstraction,

... The image is a likeness that expresses the archetype in such a way, that there is always a difference between the two...  
(McKeever 2005 p. 29).

McKeever continues,

They are alike but different, and in that difference, the gap between the archetype and the image, is where we find abstractions. Abstractions which paradoxically can make things more real and concrete than those ‘real’ things we had presumed to be so... (ibid).

McKeever seems to be acknowledging, then, that the real and the concrete in fact lie between this implied archetypal core underlying all experience and the painted image before us, that it requires a leap of imagination to access this reality and thus move beyond surface illusions – this of course points us back to Plato. McKeever does then appear to be implying that his notion of “real” is found in the abstraction – the form that is situated between archetype and image. In other words, “real” is not representational but presentational and it does not necessarily have to point us to images we can tie to the world of objects or of familiar experiences. Arguably, it may well be the case that the stranger and more unfamiliar the image, the deeper and potentially more life changing the experience.



**Figure 4 Untitled, David Parker**

What I am saying, then, is that fundamental to the move to abstraction, is the desire to access and hence acknowledge the imaginal reality of depth experience and that this experience is essentially sacral in its meaning. For me, it is sacral because the core experience of abstract art creates a state of being that effectively negates the sense of self as a separate and detached entity confronted by the enormity and confusion of a coldly objective material world. Rather, the world through abstraction becomes animated with a meaning that transcends human understanding as such, placing meaning in the eternal divine realm accessed through the “mirror” of aesthetic engagement in the materially based image. I do not so much, in the conventional sense, *understand* through abstraction, indeed paradoxically the opposite is true – I *experience* the mystery of its hidden meaning in the same way that one might engage in a religious experience.

In his essay “Abstract Painting and the Spiritual Unconscious” (2000), art critic Donald Kuspit discusses the use of the word *spiritual* arguing for its use as an essential aspect of how we might entertain notions of the unconscious in relation to painting. For Kuspit, abstract painting is fundamentally spiritual in perspective. He says:

... pure abstract painting is meant to lead the spectator to conversion, that is, catalyze a conversion experience, in which the spectator sees the light, as it were, in and through the painting, in the same flash of light that is so often literally represented in religious painting... (Kuspit 2000, p. 63)

Clearly then, it can be seen that abstract painting, within the trajectory of modernist aesthetics and some post modern developments, appears to be motivated by (if one can entertain such a notion) what are in effect secularized, spiritual concerns. In this sense, the spiritual as a concept finds its voice independent of formalised religious structures and yet, in terms of the essential mystery underscoring its meaning, has a deep resonance with many of the key elements of religious practice.

### **Painting and Self -Transcendence**

I would like to conclude with a return to my own work and what it means for me to try to make significant painting at this point in history. I approach painting with a desire to access what I can only describe as a deeper truth based on a practice that appears to be a form of transcendence through aesthetic transformation. Fundamental to this is the need to visualize and access a form of “vital image” without recall to representation (re-presentation) and to engage imagination via the formal qualities inherent in the activity.

For my own part, I can only describe such a process as an intensely compulsive - perhaps even ultimately a devotional activity – one that seems to take over and guide me into states of experience that appear to transcend ordinary consciousness and access a numinous core. Such states are indeed, for me, deeply therapeutic and transformative in their ability to provide access to imaginative realms that are essential and vital to the deepening of my whole life experience.

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