



Interview with Chester Arnold

Part 1

August 25, 2014

Chester Arnold (CA)

Thomas Singer (TS)



Figure 1

TS: It looks like you're deep into an excavation right now. [Figure 1]

CA: It's a subject that I've worked on periodically... Probably the longest and most sustained period of so called excavation paintings was in 1983-84. It started when I was flying on a trip to Boston. In the flight magazine there was a photograph about the size of a postage stamp of some dig in Africa and there was a man in a white suit with a panama hat standing over the ground looking at a hole and I thought to myself "That's such rich material, I've got to do a painting" because I couldn't stop thinking about it. I've always loved imaging space from slightly elevated point of view because of the kinds of aesthetic structures that emerge in those perspectives when you're interpreting or imagining a space. So I just started carving excavations into these little imaginary planes

and what emerged was all kinds of unexpected things. I started to imagine excavations of... ancient things, modern things and future things.



Figure 2

This was during the Reagan years in which one never knew when a button could actually be pushed and civilization would be reduced to that little Anthropocene layer of 88 million years ago.

That was a pretty rich territory for me to explore...anyway this new painting [Figure 1] is another painting in that series. Because of the scale of this new canvas, the invitation was to dig broader and deeper and change the scale to make it more vast and that appealed to me too. There are so many factors that go into making images originally...you know I have this lecture that I give my students and it's a chart [Figure 3] which I devised in a sketch book that has a series of concentric circles and in the

center of this universe of concentric circles is the “primal artist”, the child, the creative impulse...which, in my view, everybody is born with a certain amount or charge of.

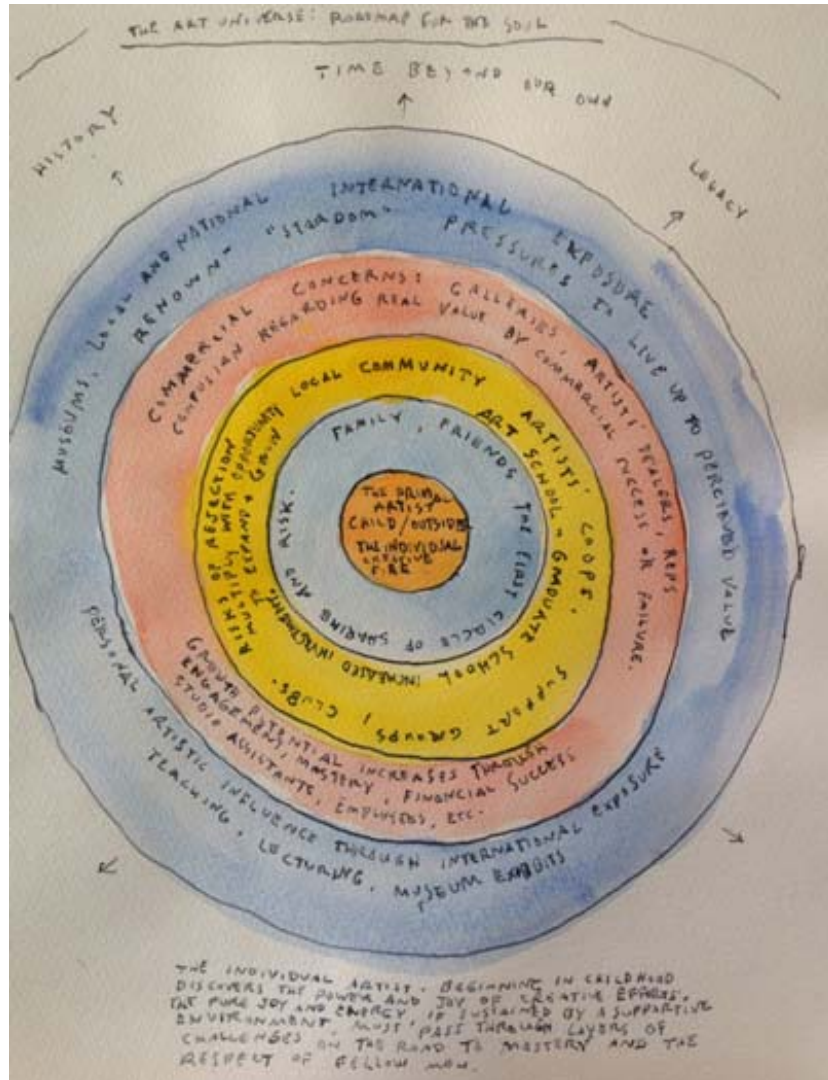


Figure 3

And I saw that as my kids were growing up that they had very vivid imaginations and were motivated and inspired to make things all the time -- as I recall, I was too as a child -- and then slowly through school, other disciplines start to be overlaid on consciousness and then eventually that part of the brain—whether neurologically or just sociologically- - that creative part is forced into a corner in most cases unless there are parents who

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really encourage it or unless the impulse is so strong that it's irresistible. So, my students, a lot of them--the older ones especially-- come in broken down in that sense, from originally having had some artistic experience earlier in their lives when someone either insulted them or they had a teacher who said 'No, you're no good. You should do something else.' That turned a switch off in that creative impulse and so my job is to turn it back on because I think it's still in there and I've found that it still is with a certain amount of support. So, in the center of that universe is that "primal artist" with the individual creative fire...and the next level is the realm of friends and peers and family which is the world that the creative effort is shared with first. And then the world beyond that, the concerns beyond that become education, college and then each ring moves further and further out to a professional career. The last universal ring is eternity and the world beyond us, history beyond us.

My invitation to my students is to move as far as we can from these levels of concern, from the first level on. And in my case, my dream has always been to fly as far as I can and into the unknown and end up making something that would be worthy of communicating beyond our own time. I don't know why I've always felt that but I've discovered that the things that I value from the past are having that conversation with me. Why not have the ambition to have that conversation with the future? As a teacher with younger students you do have the opportunity to have that conversation with the future because they're still in development.

TS: Well in the excavations...well, no, I'll take one step back - to the primal creative child. When I was in medical school (which was a disaster for me in many respects), it was a time of great upheaval for me personally and culturally; the outer world of the late 1960's was turning upside down, too. I got into tremendous trouble psychologically; everything bubbled up from my past around disease and suffering and death and all that. I ended up in a Jungian analysis in my third year of medical school and at one point I had an excavation dream in which I kept going down through layers of this house and eventually came to a place in the floor that you could open with a latch or hatch. When I got down into the bottom of this pit there was a solitary monkey that had

learned to play an instrument that had one string on it. It was playing a little tune with a single string and it was quite surprising because it was that kind of prehistoric creative impulse sort of buried somewhere in the psyche. I don't know if I have got there yet, but when you talk about the "primal child" that resonates with my own experience. I guess the question that comes to mind about your excavation paintings as related to what you're communicating to your students about creativity, is part of the downward going of the excavations an effort make contact with that primal creative child or is that a different thing? Is that a different kind of excavation?



Figure 4

CA: I think in my case it's a multi-layered. What drove me to make work in the first place was that primal energy. I think from the beginning I always seemed to have an irresistible wattage of that kind of energy. It allowed me to work far longer on my projects than anybody else so that I ended up having really better results. At least they were more comprehensive, more complete. But, as I started a professional career as an artist, things got a little confused over the years...well, at least at first they did, because of the fears one has entering the commercial world: "Do I have to sell my soul to the devil in order to succeed?" I was very fortunate to have galleries and I still do. Whether the work sells or not, the galleries are still interested in it because of the content and the energy and ideas that are present in the work. So I was very fortunate to find people that would be willing to show my work. There are a lot of galleries for whom it's a business; they have to sell work and they look to push an artist in a certain direction. I've never had to do that but I do think about it. It doesn't control the destiny of what I do, but it has been a layer of concern. I guess it's like if I was writing a book, I would want what I was saying to be legible and understandable to some degree. I do care about what people see in the work but because my work has always been so accessible I've never seemed to have any trouble with at least some people who are willing to take the time to look.

One of my growing concerns about people being willing to take the time to look is that the attention span of the average young person who has grown up in the last 20 years is smaller, including my own daughters. One in particular is very gifted in lots of ways but she has a very short attention span. She'll look at something and [Chester snaps his fingers] take it in in an instant, but she won't pore over it and stare at it the way I do, One of my greatest pleasures, even in my teens, was to go to a museum and sit in front of a really interesting painting for as long as it was pleasurable, and sometimes that was a really long time. I attribute that to the pleasure center in my brain which must be vast because I get such pleasure from contemplating things. So much is entering us all the time and they are like nutrients pouring into the brain to be used by it to configure and reconfigure what it needs to do. So I think for my students, they want to learn how to do certain kinds of things. Sometimes a person wants to be able to paint a flower or a body or a face. I try to push beyond that so they have the confidence to believe that any

impulse that might rise up is a valid impulse. And, you know we can balance skill training with a kind of a thoughtful contemplation. So, that involves talking a lot about work, and showing work...images of work. We go to museums and sometimes I bring some of my own work in for better or worse, to talk about my own process because you know...we're all human beings and they understand and I understand. I don't know if that answers your question.

TS: Well, I guess when you talked about the model of concentric circles that you use to inform your students or that guides you in some ways, I shouldn't layer that on top of your excavations . They are not the same things. [laughter]



Figure 5

CA: Well, they're similar in some ways though, because the concentric layers of the drawing of the primal artist and the shelving of the excavation painting that goes back in depth are both trying to get back to that primal impulse . For me, a lot of the magic in my work, has always been that it has its origins in strictly visual terms. Whether I see

something or whether I'm sketching something in very rough doodles the imagery emerges and it will either be interesting or not and it's non-verbal at that point.



Figure 6

I've always trusted that the things that were most interesting would seem so afterwards - and by afterwards I mean a month afterwards or even after the work has been completed and shown. That's when I perceive some kind of metaphorical structure that makes me understand why I did the painting. It's almost like I'm doing it and then I am realizing what it is revealing to me. While I'm doing it, while I'm making it, it's often times the unknown, the drive, the draw, the magnetism that is non-verbal that's pulling me forward. And for me the best and most exciting works are the ones I don't really quite understand why along the way and then in the end I think 'Oh this, okay; yes, this

makes so much sense; this is so much what I wanted to say.’ So, there is that magical element that I love. I use a phrase of John Updike to describe this process. In a New York Times Review of Books, Updike described Vincent Van Gogh’s paintings as ‘bristling with wordless meaning’ and I love that...it just sounds so much like how it feels to ‘bristle with wordless meaning’ – how something that is completely inert, a scene or a composition of some kind, can have an implication and a meaning and a symbolic or referential meaning that is so powerful.

TS: You know, when I was thinking about coming up here I realized it would be easiest to get sidetracked into, ‘what does your work mean?’. It strikes me as probably a question that you would not be interested in and it’s not really a question that I wanted to ask. What actually led me to follow up on our brief conversation at our mutual friends’ house was that you were talking about the thought processes you were having while painting. As you described them, they were really metaphysical or philosophical discourses that would just come to you. I don’t know whether they accompanied the imagery, but there was some kind of conversation you were describing that is really interesting to me.

CA: In recent years I’ve taken to listening to books on tape while I’m painting. I’ve always listened to music similarly until books on tape became available. My favorite book has been *The Essays of Montaigne*. The territory that he encompasses is just so vast; it’s so rich you just think ‘God, I wish I could have known this guy,’ , But in fact by reading and listening to the reading, you know him! [Laughter] And that gets back to that idea of communicating beyond your time, to another time. And Montaigne is constantly referencing the classics, and writers and historical figures from the past. It’s amazingly rich; it’s almost like an education in the humanities too. And only rarely does something he writes stand out as being stuck in its time, a kind of prejudice.



Figure 7

But the buoyancy of his thinking is a kind of consciousness that acts like an aquifer or a watershed-- all these things are trickling in and, when the right things trickle in, growth is encouraged. I've never been a systematic enough person to actually try to create a formula for inspiration. And, I'm not even sure you can be systematic about that anyway. What would it be like: add four volumes of Montaigne, add a little bit of Goethe, some poetry of Robert Frost, shake for three minutes and you end up having a formula for inspiration?...But it doesn't work that way. What does happen is that certain things seem to be appropriate for the atmosphere of a particular time. Right now listening to Montaigne is it. I've gone through the complete essays one and a half times and, as I listen to them a second time, I start to recognize certain things went past me directly into that watershed. I go back and listen to them and actually press the repeat button. As much as I've felt disdainful of it, this is where I'm really appreciative of technology. It is such a great research tool to have: to be able to reflect, especially as I've gotten older. I can't remember quite as sharply as I could and the repeat button has really added a lot. I've had this conversation recently with other painters who find their most fruitful times are when the verbal, intellectual side of their brain is occupied with

something like listening to a book or music. Then, whether it's the left or right brain, or whatever you want to call it, releases the more intuitive side so that it is not encumbered by the judgment that would normally be inflicted by that intellectual side which is otherwise engaged. Much of that kind of judging gets in the way of the free flow of creative energy. For almost every artist that I know, that's an issue.



Figure 8

TS: That's such an interesting idea. If you can distract the rational mind and give it something to work on, you can free up another part of the mind....I guess the interesting question would be, maybe once you free your mind up from the critical aspects of the rational mind are you setting it free to have some unspoken dialogue going on between Montaigne and whatever imagery you're working on?

CA: I would say that there is not a direct correlation between what I'm hearing and what I'm visualizing. I've listened to other things which have had a different effect. For instance, I'd never really read much fiction, and a friend gave me a reading list which included Saul Bellow as one of his favorites. So I went through all of the work of Saul Bellow on audio books and it was just an incredible experience. Of course it's visual and tactile and vivid and has nothing to do with the content of my work but somehow the excitement and vitality of that work didn't impede what I was trying to do.

TS: Well I wonder if the dialogue, or whatever we're calling it, gets activated when somebody as creatively brilliant as Bellow who clearly has that primal creative child at work in his writing stimulates that part of your own psyche in some way and the content of what he's writing about doesn't really matter?

CA: Well, I was just listening to something from *The Adventures of Augie March*, and I was realizing that what is so delightful about it is in the vividness of his recollection, or, his ability to describe a human experience that was recognizable in just a few phrases, and in such a vivid and unusual and surprising way. And that is one of the magic aspects of literature and words and communication in general. Clearly, Bellow had spent a lot of time sensitively observing and feeling the world around him that then became part of a world that he was also making up, irrespective of where the scenes actually came from. And that's how I want to feel the world in my own way, to be open minded and open eyed to all things around me. In my view of the world I'm here only now with the equipment that I have. Fortunately the equipment that I have allows me to experience great pleasure by observing and exploring avenues both of the real world and the interior creative realm. It's provided me with a purpose in life and a fuel that keeps me wanting to paint again and again and again – to come back out here to my studio and look at a blank canvas and begin to poke around and find my way into another story, another vision, another set of ideas and symbols.



Figure 9

In the case of Montaigne, he's talking about ideas, reflecting on behavior and, in some cases, describing historical events. It's a very different kind of intellectual experience to be listening to him as opposed to Saul Bellow while painting. I don't see things as vividly with Montaigne as I see them when I hear Bellow's writing. It sort of goes somewhere else in the brain [laughter] which as you know, is like a big piece of Swiss cheese. There are all these different little rooms in the brain where those things are considered. I think it's true with different genres of painting too; if one's an abstract painter, the concerns are very different than those of a painter who carves out an imaginary space, or is visualizing an imaginary space that's inconstant flux and that's being constantly remodeled. For me, one of the joys of making a picture like this excavation is deciding what stays and what doesn't. I have the power to deepen the cavern or open a hole in the side of the cliff or put in a rail line. I mean it's like a child playing in a sandbox, in the best sense of the word. The metaphor of the sandbox is a good one because I can actually recall the same kind of delight playing and digging around in a sandbox . I hadn't really thought about it until just now but that was a great joy. There is great joy and magic in shaping the soft earth and feeling your way into this world.



Figure 10

TS: My...Just on the theme of excavations I have two separate reactions to the painting itself and one association to a project my sister-in-law is working on., I imagine when you're excavating you're digging for something and one of the interesting things in just looking at this canvas is that there's such a mystery in what you're digging for. And where? If one enters its imaginary world as if it's real, you know it's going down and you assume with all of this kind of hard work that the excavation to create it is not just the work of a single individual but a whole human enterprise. One person doesn't do this-- then what's this digging for?

CA: What's the purpose of it all?

TS: What's the purpose of it all? There also is something about it that is both exciting and also something that is slightly sinister about it. [Laughter]

CA: Yeah there is at this point of the painting. You know when I did the last little one it raised exactly the same dilemma and it was resolved to some degree. And this one too. I

don't know exactly what they're digging for. In the last one I ended up excavating bones, like fossil bones, and so there were some pallets with excavated bones looking like maybe the humerus of a Mammoth. So maybe they've come across something like that in this excavation. On the other hand, I've always like quarries as well, and this is looking pretty much like a limestone quarry--like Bavarian limestone used for lithography which has been on my mind lately. Whether that's going to stay there or not, I don't know, and that's part of the fun of it, too. Because the balance between the known and the unknown is so important. If the image rendered is seen as too specific then it starts to feel like an illustrated idea rather than a revelation. There is another quote from someone...who was it? I can't remember the author of it but: 'Art is not about representation; art is about revelation.' With respect to making images of things, and for me it is very much the case, representation really isn't the goal; it's the revelation that occurs along the way about whether something is real or less real or...it can take many shapes. Any amount of abstract work has the same option to reveal something that wasn't there before. And how it is revealed and how that revelation finds dignity and meaning and endurance culturally has something to do with the individual's sensitivity and skill and the devotion to that process that allows that to happen at the highest level. So, I'm always feeling like I am being admonished by history to spend more time and allow myself to feel more deeply, if possible, so that I can basically make the best thing that I can possibly make for myself and for my culture. And that's not always possible because life is busy. But I do have a lot of time to do that and I feel like, 'Well, for better or worse this is what I do, I enjoy it and...[laughter].'

You know, I started a website or a Facebook page for my students and my friends which is very unusual for me, and everybody was kind of shocked at first. It's called 'Painters Union Local 14.' And the 'Painters Union Local 14' is a posting place for people, visual artists and others, who are interested in ideas about the arts and visual arts. And it's become really kind of a fun thing; I mean friends, people, students, friends, artists from all over participate. In fact, through that, I encountered this young guy who I thought you'd also like, Aaron Wiesenthal, who lives in San Diego and he's probably in his early 30s...I mean he looks young. But his work has such symbolic power, some of these things, especially this painting of the tunnel.



Figure 11 *Aaron Weisenthal, The Wedding Party*

TS: Oh my.

CA: That to me is really magical. This tunnel is in the snow. Is it a train tunnel? But then, it doesn't quite look like a train track we've ever seen before. Anyway, I found him through this site. So, someone knew him and he knew my work and had admired my work and I hadn't ever known that. So, he sent me a note on my Facebook page and we connected and then sent each other catalogues, so we've started this little friendship.

TS: I can see how you're sort of brothers or something because there's such an affinity between a feeling of what you're about and what he's about.

CA: Yeah, and as I wrote to him I said: 'Damn. Wish I had painted that one.' [laughter] And that's really interesting to me because I think those connections appear. Every so often there's another young painter in San Francisco who I run across and it almost seems like we're coming from the same tribe of interests.

TS: Back to the excavations and bones. Some time ago, my brother and sister-in-law moved down to Vero Beach, Florida. My sister-in-law heard about this small group of local people who were working with a couple of archeologists on an old archaeological dig in Vero Beach. The water district was about to destroy a site where there seemed to be the first evidence of Mastodons and humans being living together at the same time in North America. There were bones of both of them together. And so she, along with some other people, have formed a local group, and they've raised money to protect the land, and work with the archeologists, to re-explore this old dig which first began in the early 20th century.

CA: It could actually rewrite history and the history of America?

TS: This excavation could rewrite the history of America as it shows signs of mastadons and humans living together 14,000 years ago.

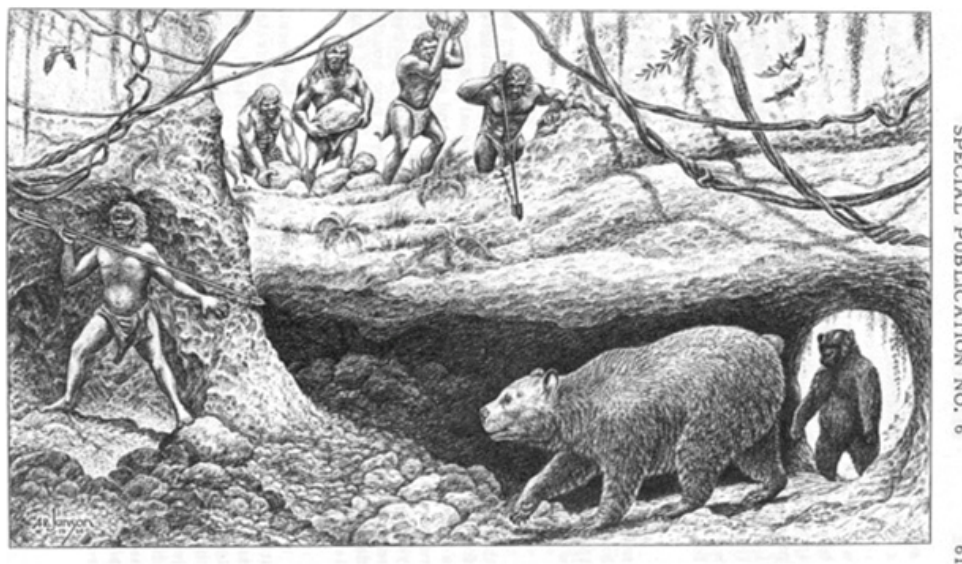


Figure 12 Artist's Conception of Pleistocene Vero Man and Cave Bear

CA: How wonderful. I mean, I love stories like that.

TS: They have a blog site which is really great because it is it's so funky and local. They call themselves The Old Vero Ice Age Sites Committee (<http://www.oviasc.org>) A group of citizens got excited, wanted to protect the site and are funding its excavation

But the other thing about bones and excavations that I wanted to mention is a dream that Jung had when he and Freud were traveling together to the United States in 1906. While crossing the Atlantic, they told one another their dreams on the ship. It was a critical moment in their coming together and their breaking apart. Jung had a big complicated dream of a house, a multi-century house. As he went down the levels of the structure, he went from the 19th or 20th century to the 15th century and then he went further down and eventually came to a dark cave, at the bottom of which were these bones – two skulls. And, that was the beginning of the break-up between Freud and Jung because Freud thought that the two skulls were Jung's death wish for Freud. [laughter]

CA: He was so motivated by his paranoia-- it sounds like to me. [laughter]

TS: So, right at the beginning of one of the most important relationships in the history of psychoanalysis is this excavation dream with bones at the bottom of the site. This excavation or going down dream basically became a critical turning point in the history of modern psychoanalysis.

CA: Well, there are surely many more examples of symbolic and actual excavations, going from modern times backward or downwards—such as finding Pompeii under layers of the sediment from the volcano. Or, after World War 2 in Europe digging down after the bombings and the excavations in Cologne, they found all these ruins of Roman civilization. They created this whole museum of Roman artifacts that were excavated, after the war, and no one knew they were there. Well in literally going back down through those layers, that's the story of humanity and even its origins are revealed. People might resist it, 'No, I don't want to believe that...there were people here that long ago, and who were they?' Here's another example of that down-going. I was invited to

make a painting for an exhibit in the Nevada Museum next year. It's an invitational show to a bunch of American artists, They gave me a book to read, *Tahoe Under the Surface*, and there's a story in the book about the 'Spirit Cave Mummy.' A mummy was found in the 1960s in a cave just outside of Tahoe, and it was buried with artifacts that resembled Native American artifacts that were maybe 300 or 400 years old. As the analysis proceeded and became more sophisticated, the scientists found that the mummy was actually closer to 10,000 years old and that the skull of this mummy was not at all similar to the skull of a Native American . The speculation became, 'Where did it come from?' There was a lot of suspicion about it being a fraud but evidently it's not a fraud because they found other, very similar remains subsequently. But very similar to the story about Vero Man because it upsets a lot of traditional views about who was here first and whose territory was it?

TS: There is something about your excavations which both suggests this kind of literal down-going and uncovering layers but it's seems to me, or at least my feeling is, that you're actually talking about something else. You are perfectly happy to inquire about and are interested in these real excavations. But I have the sense—perhaps incorrect—that your work is really about something else – is that fair?



Figure 13 Sub specie Aeternitatis

CA: That is fair and you know, I think it gets to the point of the specificity of the image. I recall my early experiences in school when I was kind of a mediocre student except in art. I had a great art teacher who identified me as a devotee and as somebody who was motivated. I guess that doesn't happen that often today; you rarely get a student who is just driven and excited about everything in the subject that you're teaching. But when I got into high school and began to study poetry in earnest for the first time I really got interested in literature and English. There was something in poetry that I recognized as important, but I couldn't have described why. I only now look back and think that this was the case because I liked the presence of, or the awareness of, metaphor. I liked how one thing could represent another, and that language could be distilled into something that shimmered with different kinds of meaning. In fact it shimmered with that 'bristling' meaning- but in the case of poetry it had to be through words rather than the "bristles with wordless meaning" that Upkike used to describe Van Gogh. I learned that things could be exciting even though they were suggesting something other than what they seemed to represent; that to me was the magic of it. And at that point all I wanted to do was write poetry and make paintings because it was a way of understanding and expressing my feelings about the world. Poetry and painting were the languages I felt I could speak most naturally and I responded to historical works that had that same mystery and magic to it. Wallace Stevens is a good example of a poet in whose work you often have no idea what he's actually writing about, but it's absolutely magical and dreamlike to be exposed to it, anyway.

TS: I think that's why I'm drawn to your work. I think that's precisely why. I was telling some friends who I used to play tennis with and now have coffee with at our tennis club that I was coming up to visit you and they wondered, 'What kind of painter is he?' And I said, 'Well, it's "symbolic realism" and then I looked on the internet because they wanted to see something of yours and your work was described as 'Narrative Realism'

CA: Yeah, narrative realism.

TS: Narrative realism. But to me, it's more symbolic realism because it's so real and so symbolic at the same time. The bristling quality comes from that.



Figure 14

CA: I'm really interested in language's ability or inability to describe the visual qualities in art. I'm always looking for writers who can do that well, and there aren't that many who seem to understand aspects such as you're describing..... I'm currently in a show and the premise for it has turned out to be really interesting. Rather than trying to define anything it raises more questions than it answers and that's the kind of show I really like. In the contemporary world realism is just kind of viewed as a mimesis , a copying of the world as it appears, for the sake of seeing how accurate one can get. And many people still believe that that somehow is the highest expression of artistic skill, to make something look exactly the way it appears when in fact that's just the starting point of where the magic is. And I think this show is a good example of that, because almost no one in the show - except for maybe Guy Deal, who paints from photographs of a pile of books - is really that concerned with that. In fact they're concerned with exactly what is beyond that, the symbolic implications and the narrative implications.

TS: I think one of the reasons your painting has a slightly sinister quality for me is that there's this wonderful miasmic vapor – [laughter]

CA: It's just starting actually, I was just starting to develop that. [laughter]

TS: Is that right? [laughter]

CA: Something's happening down there.

TS: Something's happening down there. [laughter]

CA: Well, the first of these paintings didn't have anything moving like that and as I was painting there was sort of a scuff of paint in that area and I thought, you know, that might really be interesting to see how the eye moves around in the space and how the perspective of the whole is actually shaped by this cloud and how it moves out of the whole. So part of my challenge now is to decide what that smoke is. Is it going to be dust? Is it going to be smoke and how's that going to inhabit the space?



Figure 15

Well, actually, in fact my temptation is to take it up above that ridiculous board which is stretching across the middle, which I actually might take out. I don't know if I like that anymore. It was going to be a bridge, but I am concerned with the balancing of – and this gets back to aesthetic concerns which are beyond the description of anything – the aesthetic structures and how they themselves have a resonance, and a rightness and wrongness or a greater and lesser energy, depending on what they do, the way a form moves around them. And I think that gets back to, ultimately, some really old school views of composition and golden section that I don't really focus on but I do know when something is moving in the right direction; it usually has that kind of harmonic resonance – you'll kind of hear it, or feel it: 'Yes, this is the right thing to be doing here.' And that's probably the most difficult thing to teach. I mean you can teach a student what a composition is, how the eye moves around a composition, but it's kind of like teaching somebody about the structure of poetry. You can teach everything about meter, rhyme schemes and everything else but that doesn't mean that person will become a poet just because they know that. That's just the raw equipment that makes something, not the magic that inhabits it.

TS: It's almost as if you anticipated the miasmatic vapor in this painting, lining up with some movement in that rock which preceded it–

CA: There's an S-curve in there. I'm just seeing that now. You know I was waiting for my mother; I had to take my mother to Kaiser to have an arm X-Ray yesterday, and there was a book in there, in the waiting room, on fractals. And I don't really know what fractals are, but I'd heard about fractals and they have something to do with the representation and structure in the natural world, and many of the illustrations really appealed to me because they had exactly those kinds of twists and turns and curls which, natural landscapes have, which smoke has.

TS: Oh, I see.

CA: The way that cement cracks, or the way that stone cracks; there are all these forces, the angle of repose...the way that soil gravitationally forms a shape and an angle in space

of a certain weight and angle. All of those things are parts of a representation that either rings harmonically true or not. Or that creates a surreal effect because they're pushing the limits of what we might be aware of although we might not know what that is. It's one of the fascinating things in critiques, when looking at realist works, people will say, 'Oh, it doesn't seem right to me,' but they can't say why. It's like, I think Henry James famously said that, 'A portrait is a picture in which something is wrong with the mouth.' [laughter] And you don't know quite what it is, but you know because we have such a vivid sense of it.

TS: There's a tremendous inner sense of what's right and wrong.

CA: Exactly.

TS: That has rules based in the natural order of things.

CA: It's true, and people have a very, very sharp sense of that right and wrong. even though that sense might not have been objectified by their becoming a working artist. I think the average person has a very high degree of awareness of that. And I use my mother as an example. I don't think my mother ever moved beyond the 8th Grade in her education and never really had that much curiosity to take it further. But, she has this incredibly sharp sense perception and still at her age – she's 92 – will notice everything: the color of a flower, the shape of a shadow, whether my shirt is buttoned up wrong or whether I've trimmed my mustache too much on one side. I mean she notices everything. And she's the kind of person who has a visual response to things that is really sophisticated and completely natural; it's almost as if it is just wired in as an animal instinct. And, I think maybe it's just an evolution of the hunter gatherers' abilities that we had. Those who were successful were the sensitive ones who noticed and could find things or identify things or hit the target when required, ...That's a lot of jumbled information [laughter] but I think it comes to the same point that it's really about sensitivity, and whether that sensitivity is natural or whether it's trained or whether it's encouraged through training. That awareness is really essential. And what gets in the way of that in people? It gets back to that little circle in the center (of image

3) of the artistic universe. What are the forces that get in the way of that for people and how can we return to that and find at some really deep level what we have to say, what our purpose is, what the meaning of our life is? I think the meaning of our lives is very much tied up to that kind of primal instinct and information that we're born with and if we're not allowed to flower in the right circumstances I think life could be very frustrating. And I've been very lucky to be able to do what I do and be appreciated for it by my community but not everybody has that, enjoys that...

TS: Well, I was actually thinking of my mother while you were talking of your mother in regard to her natural, almost instinctual, response to things. My mother was pregnant with twins when she was 40. I was 8 years old. My mother got a very severe ulcerative colitis and they had to take out a lot of her bowel as well as the two fetuses. Her creative life, as she thought it would be at that time, was over. Then she had a profound transformation. We lived in St. Louis and my mother decided she wanted to take some courses in art at Washington University and there was a guy there named Leslie Laskey, who was a well known professor of aesthetics and art. My mother enrolled in his course. It was very unusual at that time for a forty year old woman to come to the college. It just didn't happen and wasn't encouraged. So, the first year, Professor Laskey allowed her to bring coffee to him from the basement up to the lecture hall which, as I recall, was on the third floor. She decided to take the same course for a second year in a row and she didn't have to bring him coffee. [laughter] And she took the same course for the third year in a row and they became friends. She was just so riveted by his discussion of aesthetics, and she ended up spending the next fifty years (she lived to be 90) devoted to art, first as a painter and collector and later as a designer of jewelry and as an art dealer. What I have realized over time is that what got freed up in my mother was precisely what you described in your mother, i.e, her own natural reactions to things which she learned not to be afraid of. People become afraid of the inferiority of their opinions or judgments when it comes to art. So they can't tell you whether they like something or not – they don't respond instinctively to what they're seeing, it's kind of conditioned out. They lose touch with the “primal child artist” that inhabits the inner core of your drawing.

CA: And often times it's conditioned out by people who've had the opposite problem, that is they're convinced of their own rightness and their superior judgment about art which is always a mistake. [laughter] I mean, they may have some advantages but certainly, it's usually a misperception. [laughter]

I have some disagreements with my wife on recollections and reminiscences because I love to examine the past and she says, 'You know, Chester, you spend too much time talking about the past.' The past is the rich fabric of who we are and to count the threads sometimes can be very informative and useful. In my father's case, he was a very different kind of person from my mother. He was very intellectual and had an active mind. He was extremely curious and read his entire life. In fact he was the one who gave me a copy of the Montaigne book when I was a teenager. It seemed like he read just about everything. He was primarily an autodidact. He had been in the military service and ended up in military intelligence and intelligence analysis. He became a planner, an analyst and a linguist. He studied languages and had a gift for languages. His view was much more rational and much more intellectually critical than my mother's. So, the two of them, they kind of provided two poles for me because my father encouraged me to think and my mother encouraged me to feel. I was the one child in the middle of two sets of children. When my parents were young they struggled financially as do most young parents.

They were trying to figure out what parenthood was about and I was born eight years later. I benefited from their experience. Then another pair of children were adopted and I became the older brother. I benefited from playing the role of an elder, to some degree, to them. When I think about the contributions of all those experiences to what I do, I think we all have the structures that make us who we are and I'm particularly grateful as I look at that picture – no parents are perfect, no one is perfect, but I think that my parents both had great confidence in me which really provided a fuel for my fire to persevere as an artist because it was not an easy road. I delivered The San Francisco Chronicle Newspaper for 21 years to pay for my life as a painter until I started to show at galleries and had some hope of maybe having a real career. Delivering newspapers

provided an income and freedom that was so important in the growth of my mind and skills as a painter because I basically had all day to paint. And I did not have a supervisor looking over my shoulder. Delivering newspapers became like an automatic body function: I would get up in the middle of the night. I would deliver the papers, come back home and, go back to bed. And, when I woke up in the morning, it was as though it never happened. But, wonderfully I would get a check every two weeks [laughter] and it paid the bills. You know if you make art and sell it in addition, it's all gravy from that point on which is, in fact, how life has been. And eventually I got into teaching because I felt encouraged by my wife Frances to do that. When I went to undergraduate school I realized that I had never really been a very confident speaker or even a very confident conversationalist until I was in a situation in which the issues that I had been thinking about all my life were the issues that other people were thinking about in the same direction. So, all of a sudden, I had all these wonderful notes to compare about the things that I had been thinking about all these years but somehow now they had form and meaning in a new way. So, it made for a great time in graduate school and subsequently as a teacher too. If someone had told when I was 18 that I would be standing in front of an audience giving a lecture on painting I would not have believed that possible because my self-confidence in that regard was extremely low, and very, very slow to evolve.

TS: Well I was thinking of how you paint while listening to Montaigne, and I don't mean to be a reductionist psychoanalyst, but it's as if the best of your mother and father are right with you. That wonderful, clear thinking, rational mind of your father has a place while you're following this other, different non-verbal thing. I mean, it sounds like a perfect balance, where everything that's in you is fully engaged - you're not leaving some piece out along the way.

CA: Well that's an interesting idea... This last week I was listening to Montaigne and I was wondering whether my father had ever read Montaigne. He must have read Montaigne. He never mentioned it to me but, he read a lot of stuff that I never got around to reading. I don't know what happened to all the books in his library. I have

some of them but I know that he would have loved Montaigne if he did read it because it sounds kind of like him.

TS: Does it?

CA: The kind of rambling and musing about everything from Caesar to Epicurius to whatever. In fact, I found this same quality in Saul Bellow who loves references and history that provide the texture and nutrients to the history of thought. That was very much a part of my dad, too. He died when he was 68 and I feel really regretful about the loss of his vivid mind and huge memory. Anyone that can learn three languages has got a greater capacity than I could ever muster. And here he was a middle class guy who had kind of a middle class job working for the government and ended up living in a middle class neighborhood. Maybe that's okay. He seemed happy with that. He never aspired to more...but I've often wondered, 'What if he'd gone to Harvard? Or Columbia? Or some place... and had been allowed to really develop the mind that he had because he had an amazing imagination and mind. And I think he looked to me to fulfill some of the things he had longed to do in terms of taking an adventure and making life about ideas more than just earning money. Which, I don't know if it's such a great idea or not [laughter] I remember one of my favorite quotations of my father that reveals both his sense of humor and seriousness at the same time. When I was young, I announced to him that I'd wanted to be a painter and his first response was, 'Well, couldn't you pick something more practical like epic poetry?' [laughter] He loved epic poetry and would quote it a lot – but he also knew exactly how practical it was.. And it was actually my father who paid for my art lessons out of his own salary, which wasn't that much. It was a reach for him and a fatherly gesture of great distinction in my memory.

TS: That's a wonderful quotation. It has everything in it, doesn't it? ...”Something more practical like epic poetry.”



Figure 16

CA: There's a sardonic element to it, too. He had a sarcastic sense of humor to some degree but it was tempered by lots of references. And he had a brother like that too, They were three orphans; their father was killed early in their lives and they were raised in an orphanage because their mother had to work as some kind of a stay at home. His brothers were so interesting, too. When his brother would visit us, they would talk and it would literally sound as though my father was talking to himself because their voices were almost identical in tone, depth, articulation [laughter] and they were interested in the same kind of things. They were very interested in world religions. They would talk about religions and philosophy. They were totally unlike anyone else in the vast family that emerged from the pairing that happened after their father died. They ended up having 14 brothers and sisters or 13 brothers and sisters including them. They were the only ones who had the inclination to be interested in the world of ideas. Everyone else just struggled by plastering or whatever, but my father and this one brother had an inner life that they passed on to each other and definitely passed on to me.

TS: Where was this?

CA: They were born and lived their early years in Santa Monica, Los Angeles, and Venice. It was an interesting neighborhood because at the same time, or a little bit before, the painters Jackson Pollack and Philip Guston had been living in the same area, going to the same elementary schools. To me, in looking back and thinking about my father's life and my mother's life I am very vividly aware of the connections and gifts that I was given and I would hope that I have given to my own children in some way. And it seems like they're thoughtful people; they've turned out to be very thoughtful people. I'm very proud of them, as I think my father would be. My mother's proud of them, too. She's still with us – she's losing a little bit of mental clarity but she's still pretty sharp.

TS: Well, this somehow goes back to an early comment you made about the activity of painting excavations. I think you said you did landscapes of the past, the present and the future. In the reminiscences of your mother and father and your father's family and what got handed on to you and what gets handed on to your children, that's how the landscapes of past, present, future work in the context of family. Maybe that transmission of ideas gets handed on to the broader world of culture, although it also seems like God has a quota on the number of people that he or she allows to think.
[laughter]

CA: Yeah, is there a thinking gene? I sometimes think that there is a thinking gene. Or it could just be a part of the brain that is a pleasure center. We could do a poll: how would you gauge the pleasure that you feel at reading something that you really enjoy? How would you characterize that pleasure? What is it that's being teased in the brain that actually gives you an enthusiasm and a joy? What is happening when that's going on? Some people might read the same text and not find it interesting or exciting or pleasurable at all and as a result they wouldn't even finish it. I've been there with certain kind of readings, ...I don't know. I think a lot of the ability to take pleasure in reading and ideas is educational, too. I had some really good teachers in high school who were

profound influences in thinking. And you know, it was uncommon in the era that I grew up to have teachers who demanded that you think. I remember when I came to California, because I'd gone to this school in Europe which was run by the American military. All the teachers there seemed to be almost like college teachers compared to the teachers in California. When I came to talk to the counselor at Tam High for my senior year in Mill Valley, California they asked me what I'd been studying. I said, 'Well we studied romantic literature and T.S. Elliot,' and the counselor's eyes got large. He had a gold medallion around his neck and he said "Wooaah, we're going to have to put you in the advanced section." Well, I was not an advanced student. I was not the sharpest crayon in the box, but I had been exposed to things in Europe through those teachers and that made a difference. I don't know if it made a difference to everyone in my class then, whether they've gone on to further exploits as thinkers and makers and writers – I know a few have-- but if you don't have an opportunity to be educated by a teacher who has great enthusiasm and charisma and gives you information in a vivid way and makes it come alive to you; I mean that's a great gift. And I think I had that from my father and I had it from my teachers as well.



Figure 17