

What Lies Beneath

2015

Abstract expressionism, defined by a turning away from representations of the external world in favor of explorations of internal experience had its height as an artistic movement in the 1940's and 1950's. The prominent expressionists—Arshile Gorky, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, Clyfford Still among them—experimented with evocative color fields, personal symbologies, and dream imagery in broad immersive canvases intended, as described in the ambitious statements of the artists, to involve the viewer in transcendent emotional experiences that were transformative.

Jonathan Palmer argues that the Expressionists met an "untimely end", a consequence perhaps of their grandiosity and the disillusionment that followed upon their encounters with the inevitable limitations of the power of their art. Palmer observes that many of these artists enjoyed relatively brief periods of explosive creativity followed by evidence of despair and, in the cases of Rothko and Gorky, by suicide.

Now, half a century later, as Palmer "picks up the thread" of Expressionism in his own work. His goals are more modest, but still profound. His experiments in color fields, calligraphic threads, dream imagery, and brushwork evolve into ambiguous forms, that all serve the purpose of deconstructing the world, not in terms of a visual experience of signifiers, but in terms of emotional tone.

Palmer says he is guided by an ambition to "keep the process alive." It is a point of intersection between his work as a clinical psychoanalyst and his work as a visual artist. The ambition refers to the special sense of aliveness, discernible in these paintings and recognizable in a successful psychoanalytic process, that can be the happy result of avoiding superimposed agendas and premature closure, pursuing emotional truth, and focusing on internal experience.

As a child, Palmer sketched in the garden of his home in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. His mother, an artist and teacher told him he must "be the bird to draw the bird." The South African landscape is figured and evoked throughout his paintings. His attachment to the flora and fauna of his homeland may be typical of South Africans. A Bay Area psychoanalyst of my acquaintance has transformed every inch of his property into an arboretum of the veldts. In an admission interview for psychoanalytic training Palmer was asked what he would miss most about Africa. He replied, "the earth." He adds, "It is so odd to live on a different soil than where you are from."

A few years after arriving in the United States to begin a residency in psychiatry, he took a seven-year hiatus from painting. He has trouble explaining why. Perhaps it was a period of adjustment. Following the final hour of his personal analysis he went straight to an art school to resume classes. He imagines he was making plans for the freed up time but on reflection he assumes there was a "transfer of a creative process from the couch to the canvas."

Palmer attributes his leap into abstraction to a growing familiarity with his medium. His teachers in South Africa had been inclined to political art, a direction Palmer eschews, although a turn to internal experience can be understood as one manner of political response to an oppressive apartheid regime. His early work had been figurative and anyone who has sat in a meeting with him during these last decades knows his capacity to draw. (He rues the de-emphasis of sketching and drawing fundamentals in contemporary art schools and views the turn to computer graphics as making real the "industrial packaging" so mocked by Warhol.)

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The figures lie beneath the abstractions, sometimes literally. He painted over earlier figurative works. Now the abstracts are, in words from the catalogue of an earlier show, “more felt than known.”

At the visible abstract surface the fields of color play like major and minor chords. In *Fear of Breakdown* (448, Rm. 207) a rectangle composite of greens and blues and beige floats lightly against a sky blue surround. In *Africa in a Berkshire Barn* (449, Rm. 206) the palette shifts into red and orange and green blocks that begin to shift into massive dream imagery. By contrast, *Persistence of a Woodpecker's Work* and *Garden Pursuit* (401, 433, foyer) and *Fishing at Swartkops* (459, upstairs hallway) are more spacious, airy, and fluid. The light brushwork and calligraphic figures suggest aquatic imagery. There are suggestions of swaying plants and fronds, of gentle waves and boats. Some Expressionists prided themselves on having no real world referents for their paintings. Palmer's more recognizable referents in these instances suggest memory and perhaps loss.

The experiments serve to create points of entry, resonance, and receptivity to an internal world not immediately available to awareness. Earlier works that featured pictographs and calligraphic threads are not featured in this show, but *Remnants at Crown Mines* (457, upstairs hallway) evoke these earlier “prayer paintings”, while *Crown Mines Memory* (458, upstairs hallway) begins to integrate the color fields with brush strokes suggestive of architectural forms while a large bird-like figure rides the roofs like a Chagall dream image.

Excitement at Big Tree (110, 436, Community Room) offers a particularly successful and quite beautiful integration of many of the investigations represented in the smaller works. It contains the recognizable elements of the floating rectangle. A background of aquatic and biological imagery suggestive of a deep sea pulls the viewer into the middle of the painting, while the green and black calligraphy spread liberally across the canvas evoke a somber and dream-like state.

The exhibition is named *Shadow of the Object* for Palmer's experiments with Mark Rothko's familiar floating rectangles. Palmer's own floating rectangles appear throughout the exhibition. In *Transkei Village* (Stairwell, 447) the small blocks of color congeal into a larger rectangle and dissolve like the illusion of a seamless narrative memory.

In a contemplative space (Room 204)—the room as “work of art”—Palmer has collected seven examples of his experiment and homage. Palmer's statement on these works understands the floating rectangles in terms of Freud's speculations about the mourning of lost objects. What will be taken in and what must be left behind? Palmer refers to the loss of our building at 15 Commonwealth and our migration to our new home. He might have referred as well to what is lost and retained of early psychoanalysis and early psychoanalysts. These paintings contain, as well, a suggestion of Palmer's own migration and mourning, of his new life on a foreign soil.

Something is emerging at the center of these paintings, like the navel of the dream. Gorky famously wrote to his sister Vartoosh, “Dreams form the bristles of the artist's brush.” There is an emotional tone reminiscent of Rothko's somber rectangles, of Palmer's childhood garden, perhaps of Monet's pool at Giverny.

In a 2012 publication Palmer promises, somewhat generously, that all psychoanalysts have a creative side that helps provide them with useful information about their own subjective experience. He adds that the point is “not the creation of great art.” Here, the point is the art. There is, however, an overlapping ambition: to use the imprint of the artist's exploration of their emotional experience to initiate a resonant and receptive exploration of emotional experience in the viewer.



This event is hosted by the Boston Psychoanalytic Society and Institute.
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