

BLOOD OF FLORA AND FAUNA

“...my feeling for the organic rhythm of all things...with the trembling and the movement of blood in nature, in the trees, in the animals, in the air...”
Attributed to Franz Marc by Reinhold Heller, pg. 58, “Hildegard Auer, A Yearning for Art”

Recent personal experiences, observations and discussions have prompted this essay about a very basic matter of some considerable complexity, intrigue and subtlety...or, at least it seems so to this author. That matter is the topic of whether works of art are the product of mind or emotion, the brain or the gut, the highly intellectual or basic deep “feelings”.

Obviously we have motivations for making art objects or they would not emerge at all. Somewhere in our brains and bodies we are inspired and then engaged, expressing the motivations in outward action and material form. Call this process a “need”, call it an “illness”, call it what you will...but it must be clear to all that it is a creative act, and I suggest it is an extension of the evolutionary process which pervades the Universe. So I believe...without the need to bring a supreme being into the discussion.

**We are using our brains and bodies to create art. Somewhere there is a personal balance struck that melds our mind’s thoughts and bodily “feelings” in order to produce work. By feelings I mean the viscera, the gut, the subconscious, the primordial, the instinctive and/or intuitive...perhaps that manifested in and thru the enteric nervous system...and the yet unclear link between it and the physical brain in our skulls. Visit this Internet site for more professional information:
<http://www.hosprract.com/issues/1999/07/gershon.htm>.**

Stimuli which arouse sensations and thoughts in the body unite in what we know as the “mind”. That is not a physical thing with bodily presence, but the diaphanous floating thinking and feeling entity that is the result of some still mysterious and chemical processes acting within the actual body. It is my belief that the mind disintegrates when the body dies, for it cannot exist without the supply of energy provided by the organized body.

To speak of a “soul” is another related matter that I will not get into here, though I will suggest that the soul may be another name for mind and/or feelings. Again, I will not enter into the subject of a deity here...though the

word “spiritual” as it unites with mind and motivation might be an operative one...as is the word “numinous”.

Suffice it to say at this juncture, the creation of art objects, however defined, is an extension of our thoughts and feelings, an organization of matter...and an expression of energy.

THE PRACTICAL MATTER OF POPULAR ACCEPTANCE

To relate this subject to the production of art, its creation, exhibition, selection and “success”, I propose that we discuss visual art as it is presented to the interested public.

Of course, most of the public will unfortunately not have much interest in this subject, just as most of the crowd will not be particularly interested in the workings of a car motor, the processes that go on in the plumbing of our houses...or the techniques of brain surgery. The percentage of persons attuned to such specialties is small, while the public otherwise largely shows interest in popular culture, including sports, income providing work, mass media and other forms of entertainment.

A lack of appreciation and understanding of visual art has to do with a sometimes unspoken opinion, in much of the public, that art and artists are aloof, irrelevant to their lives, and at the fringe of acceptable everyday existence. This undoubtedly has something to do with a lack in the educational system plus the everyday demanding, distracting and practical needs of people. But it also has something to do with artists and art theoreticians who sometimes speak in terms difficult for the general public to grasp with any immediacy. Art talk can be off-putting to those not attuned or particularly interested.

Also, as our art culture has evolved since the 1950's, it is the case that many more visual artists have come on to the scene by the proliferation of art classes in colleges. The distance required between observer and producer has disappeared that might allow and inspire mystery and respect. Instead there is the possibility that a layperson may be unimpressed with visual art objects if they are the product of friends and associates. The familiarity brings on a callousness and disinterest, and knowing the artist's personality and intimacies affects the view of the art. This is part of the “experts come from out of town” syndrome.

ART WITHOUT EMOTION

It is sometimes the highly intellectual and conceptual art that arouses distaste for visual art. But art that arises from and arouses emotions can also be alienating depending on how it is presented and interpreted. Visual art is a form of communication, an expression of the artist, and the interpretation of the statement cannot be controlled by the person doing the expressing.

Simply, there are some art objects made and appreciated that appear on the surface to be highly intellectual. Call them esoteric, sophisticated, theoretical, abstract and/or conceptual.

Their creation and appearance are derived from intellectual consideration more so than following an instinctual or intuitive motivation to some conclusion. The physical growth/process and final product are the result of a creative act, but the final appearance may be less aesthetically appealing to some observers than an art object that relies upon a manipulation/technique that is more instinctual and spontaneous.

The final product may reveal that it was produced with little motivation to be physically pleasing in terms of color, shape, light, shadow, line and form...the more traditional described elements of art derived from basic text books teaching techniques of art making. Rather the object exists due to an intellectual response and need to explore an idea or ideas, to produce something more “of the brain”, without concentrating on making that object physically “pleasing” to the eye...or motivating an emotional response. These intellectual objects may be intriguing...interesting...inspiring...but they do not usually motivate an observer to laughter, tears, and a variety of moods. They are “of the head” and in that they at least appear to be removed from the visceral and mood provoking.

Such examples might be products from the Dada Movement, the “Fountain” of Duchamp, his “In Advance of the Broken Arm”, the Minimalist work of the 60’s such as Judd’s sculptures, and subsequent work that explores use of technology, seemingly simple “straight line” themes without emotion or sentiment, and 2D or 3D work that relies on an austere imagery that is perhaps sober and entirely temperate.

Dictionary definitions of “austere” come to mind as useful in describing the highly intellectual: severe, astringent, ascetic, cold, earnest, exacting,

forbidding, formal, grave, grim, hard, harsh, inexorable, inflexible, obdurate, rigid, rigorous, serious, sober, solemn, somber, stern, stiff, strict, stringent, unfeeling, and unrelenting.

ON THE OTHER HAND

It must be acknowledged that intellectual activity as experienced by individuals can be exciting, giving pleasure and arousing emotions. Who is to say that the form and content of a conceptual piece will not strike some people differently, either arousing quiet contemplation or deep emotion? Experience and associations are different due to differing personal evolutions...and a mental “hunch” giving a direction may be very intuitive.

It is an indisputable fact that the observer, the person looking at an art object, brings a unique set of experiences and knowledge. The observer interfaces with the object, considers, reacts...consciously or unconsciously applies knowledge and learning, and responds with thoughts and/or feelings.

The observer also responds to seeing art in a greater or lesser degree depending upon the sensitivity level at the moment. If the observer is intent, aware, open minded without troubles of the day weighing thought processes down...without being calloused or distracted, then the response might be intense and deeply felt. Ideas and associations might surface easily without restrictions or obstacles...no matter what the nature of the object being viewed.

“Art is not a matter of slavery to the emotion – or even a matter of slavery to nature – or to the aesthetic principles. It is a tempered and happy union of them all.” Marsden Hartley as quoted in “Theories of Modern Art” by Herschel B. Chipp

OUR ROOTS...OUR NATURE

I began this composition with a quote from Franz Marc concerning animals and flora. I did so because of my total belief that we human beings have arisen with and alongside of fellow living creatures on the Earth, and that we...the animal kingdom...often share characteristics. Those characteristics are not just physical ones...they are internal, unconscious...intuitive and invisible. They manifest themselves and are recognized by our expressions and actions, our responses to what we see

and experience...and they figure into our health and illnesses. Those ailments may be of physical or mental nature, or both.

If the reader here recognizes that he is of a mindset believing that humans and all of nature were created by some overseeing intelligent creature...a god...and if such a reader is not willing to explore in an open minded fashion the subject of Evolution as developed by Darwin and subsequent scientists...then the reader should just stop here. That reader is a stone, a lump of hardened concretion...unable to see truth beyond the mythology that he subscribes to.

However, no matter what one believes is the truth regarding our existence on this planet, one can find reasons to accept the idea that animals have at least developed in some parallel ways to Humankind. Living with animals should suggest to us that animals have feelings...emotions. There is clearly the emotion of fear. In many we see affection...love for their offspring or mates. We can see rage and even joy...happiness. These are basic shared feelings that humans have...either derived thru the steps of evolution or because some creator saw fit to give similar characteristics to creatures other than humans.

For god believers, one might think that god set down a “pattern”, “model”, “template”, on which to create living things, and there are only varieties based on the basic model that was created. After all, perhaps even gods do not have unlimited ways to design living things.

Beyond that, while some may see it as a poetic expression alone, all living things depend on the “pulse” of electricity that energizes them and which therefore is shared by all. Scientifically, our hearts beat because there is indeed an electrical impulse. The hearts of deer and dogs experience this too. Stop the energy supply, and all things die.

THE PLANT KINGDOM

Plants and other flora, while not in the same evolved phylum as animals, draw from Earth their sustenance...and respond to the environment in a variety of ways. It is obvious that plants have developed in very different ways than mammals and other species of animals...and they do not seem to have an ability to think as we do. However, plants do learn and modify to changing environments, especially over the course of years and decades. We know we can manipulate their genes and pass on or delete characteristics thru our intelligent selection and breeding programs.

But as living things, Flora depends on the same underlying current of energy that animals depend on. In that, we are siblings on this whirling ball of space dust. Scientists also can look back thru the millennia and postulate that all of us, human, animals...plants, were derived from events in the galaxies that dispersed the stuff of life...the energy and matter...the elixir of life. As some have said, including the science popularizer, Carl Sagan, "We are star stuff". While we cannot link ourselves in a time line very closely with vegetation, which has different sources early in evolutionary history, we also cannot be blind to our roots in an animal past.

There can be an exciting energized discussion arising from the fact that we, humans...carnivores and vegetarians...trace the source of our food back to plants. We either consume plants directly, or we find the origins of our own energy traced to and rooted in plant life. While plants may not exhibit the abilities, motivations and emotions that animals, us included, do...we are intimately linked to them.

"They tell us that plants are perishable, soulless creatures, that only man is immortal, but this, I think, is something that we know very nearly nothing about." John Muir, from "A Northwoods Companion" by John Bates

A CONTINUUM OF BRAIN AND MIND

Our physical human brain has been studied, and there is a nomenclature regarding it. Its parts have been named, and the history from whence each part emanated has been calculated...often by comparing those parts to the physical parts of animals on a lower scale of evolution. For instance, the "brain stem" can be seen as a part derived from or parallel to the brains of reptiles.

We have devised means to measure the intelligence of animals, dolphins, other primates, parrots, octopi, etc...and we have been surprised as we gradually relinquish our position as the only intelligent creatures on Earth.

The evolution of the brain and body after conception and while in the womb, maintains some elements of the phases it has gone thru over the millennia. The growing embryo reprises the physical make up and characteristics of the various life forms through which we have emerged over the millennia. The developing fetus takes the forms of fish, reptile, bird...until it ultimately arrives full term with over 99% of the same DNA as

our relatives, the Chimpanzees. (*Macroevolutionists at Wayne State University School of Medicine in Detroit announced key genetic material (DNA) of people and chimps that is 99.4% the same, according to The Washington Times (May 20, 2003). The paper quotes Dr. Morris Goodman who says "We humans appear as only slightly remodeled chimpanzee-like apes."*)

Both categories of visual art, the conceptual arising from ascetic motivations, and the visceral imagery coming from intuitive sources, are evolved from our animal ancestry. They are from the same source but are different branches of the same evolutionary tree. Our brains and intellects, and our intuitions and instincts, come directly out of preceding creatures from which we have evolved. There is a chain linking what we are to what came before.

We have learned that animals use materials to build nests, dams, bowers, and shelters, arranging objects to attract the opposite sex, and to select objects with which to gather and prepare their food. A bird drops a shellfish so it is broken on stones, a sea otter cracks a shell on the rock balanced on its chest, a Japanese monkey washes its food in a nearby stream and others follow. We have learned that animals feel emotion, whether the fear of pain and physical harm in order to avoid injury and death, or by a more complex continuum evolved thru intellectual structures of primates, elephants, dolphins, and so on.

The skill of humans in utilizing tools, in building shelters, and in creating workable societies and cultures, did not emerge full blown in the minds of human creatures. Rather there is a continuum of development arising from the gradual successful establishment of those characteristics as our ancestors wound their way thru the evolutionary sequence. We keep being surprised as we learn about various animals utilizing tools, to include Chimps, birds, elephants and otters. We discover that there are some animals that have their own cultures, as simple and humble as they may be in comparison to our more evolved examples.

Art can be defined as having a horizontal linear gradation from end to end, with art objects that are merely conceptual on one side, to the art on the other end which arises from and is meant to evoke emotional responses. Then, of course, there is all the expression lying between the two extremes that blend the intellectual with the visceral.

THE GODS AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

For humans who believe that some intelligent super intelligence was involved in the creation of the Universe, and an intelligence that still is engaged in its operation, it is important to consider the emotional life this god or these gods might have.

In the many ancient religions gods have revealed their love and anger in stories that are handed down to us orally and in written form. There are instances in various holy books with gods expressing emotions in various ways. The bible informs us of a god that can be angry, loving, and even doubtful and insecure. Those societies that we call primitive provide a panoply of gods with characteristics that arise from emotional lives.

The ancient Greeks and Romans had gods with very obvious human characteristics, including human bodily forms, human desires and failings. Christian religions tell of a god who “felt” and acted on those feelings. Societies of Africa and South America, for example, have animistic gods exhibiting all kinds of emotion.

When we as individuals deny our emotions, when we repress them and fail to acknowledge and express them, we can become mentally ill. It doesn't take much psychological analysis and education to figure that out. Most of us have had experiences of our own, either personally or as witnessed in friends and family, of persons exhibiting behaviors that arise from emotions...while all of us try to find balance thru intellectual processes, sorting out ideas, motivations, “feelings”, and establishing a reasoned balance for understanding our needs and responsible action.

Our mythical gods, it seems to me, despite having great powers, have either created humans in their own image...or have been manufactured by humans who project our own characteristics unto them.

I have my own conclusion about that, just as I have my own formed ideas about the links between us and the rest of the Universe. I am comfortable with the shared pasts, the parallel evolution, the sources of our intellect and emotions... I feel blessed that I have other species as siblings that help me understand more about myself and my fellow humans. I know, deeply, that at the very least, I feel what is felt in creatures other than me. I am fortunate to share the electric impulses that energize living things...and in having the “star stuff” that molds my body.

Whatever thoughts and emotions that motivate us to “make” art, the art making is the act of expressing, a glorious opportunity to release and to

contact other humans who may potentially respond, understand, share and communicate.

Save for the mores' of individual cultures and the popular trends of any moment, there really are no rules to what can be expressed. In fact, evolution and progress in art making arises when individuals move beyond the mores and expectations of cultures. The following list of topics, among others, is fair game to speak about, to contemplate...to share and explore with others...and utilize in art making:

The intellectual; the intuitive; reason; nostalgia; sentiment; emotion; right brain and left brain; fear of and expression of emotions; animal roots; brains and the thread of evolution; gods and feelings...

***“You feel this God in your blood, do you not? She asked...
The God that requires only our remembrance in extemis,
The gentle, the mature, the ever-young,
That demands nothing but our participation and growth,
The composer of the song of earth and all worlds.”***

From the novel, “Serpent Mage” by Greg Bear