



Waterfall of Energy, Cristina Popovici, 2003, oil and acrylic on canvas, 1800 x 2000mm.

Abstract Expressionism and concrete faith

Picasso once said, "Art is a lie that helps us to understand the truth." The 'lie' is a bending of what is 'real' (realism or naturalism), what is seen, to understand a wider truth, to embrace broader and more complex perspectives. So it is with parables - Jesus' preferred medium of communication - the use of an 'untruth,' a fiction, to convey a greater message that transcends the finite reality of what lies in front of our senses. For example, do we believe for one minute Jesus is Himself a literal door, a lamb, that the Kingdom of God is a pearl, a wedding banquet, a field of wheat, that evangelism is an act of fishing in a lake with nets? Yet without these fantasies grounded in the finite realities of our earthly everyday life, we cannot begin to comprehend Jesus' message of heaven and other worlds.

So it is with art. Art is a mechanism for and of human feeling, a vehicle to unlock and convey emotions - incongruously in a tactile way - presenting the discerning viewer with a broader unseen truth (the abstractions of invisible human emotion). At the vanguard is Abstract Expressionism, described by arts writer David Anfam (1990) as, "a landmark in the general history of art...(opening) perspectives that enfold the present."

The great attraction of Abstract Expressionism to many, is its ability to connect the internal, abstract, unseen in a direct unaffected way. It has a purity of function and purpose being unencumbered by symbols (such as Pop Art), collectively agreed images or distracting naturalistic capture. At its best Abstract Expressionism communicates spirit through pure form, colour, pattern and composition. People view an abstract expressionistic work and are immediately attracted, repulsed, confused or uplifted by it. Viewers are agreeing that something of or in the painting touches their spirit. It would be puerile to engage the genre purely from the analysis of technique, whether dribbling or splattering paint from above (Pollock) or applying oil on canvas against a wall (Neil Frazer). This would miss the point altogether, a bit like viewing Masaccio's *Expulsion from the Garden*, or a Christ passion, from the sole perspective of surface pigment, layers and composition. The art is about emotion! and seeks to stir us.

Yet there would be little consensus about meaning or what is actually 'seen' in any given Expressionist work. This was parodied by the great American conservative realist Norman Rockwell in *Abstract and Concrete (The Connoisseur, 1962)* where a respectable gentleman dispassionately reads a huge



Letter With Words Hidden in Colour (9 panels), Cristina Popovici, 2002, plaster, oil and acrylic on board, 1680 x 1900 mm.



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abstraction, and a New Yorker cartoon of 1964 depicting a couple perplexed by a sunset in the form of a famous Rothko-style work (1964), "now, there's a nice contemporary sunset." Senior curator at Te Puna o Waiwhetu Neil Roberts, prefers Expressionism as an art form because it conveys something of the spirit or passion of the artist. "Expressionism is a movement of the inner spirit and that is what attracts my eye."

As such, it can be a great herald of spirituality, "shifting positions about an unknown center" (Seitz 1955). Of the two Abstract Expressionists surveyed for this article, Cristina Popovici of Christchurch [see interview] and Lillian Carland of Melbourne, both spoke of an inner life force, feeling or faith (I would say artistic spirit), pushing out against words and other concretions to express and communicate abstract notions in a tactile medium. Quiltist Sue Spigel (p. 10) also expresses this sentiment, as she turned her art away from the commercial to the more inner and reflective. In 1945 the great pioneer of Abstract Expressionism, Rothko, said, "[we are] finding a pictorial equivalent for man's...consciousness of his more complex inner self." Gottlieb called it 'the beginning of seeing.' Both are deeply spiritual statements.

This does not equate to religion however. (How would one paint a 'religious' abstract expressionist work?). From the early days, many of the Abstract Expressionists rebelled against conventional religion, dabbling instead with Theosophy, Krishna Murti and pantheism. McCahon, that great soul painter (who has been placed on the same level as Jackson Pollock 1)

is said to have been influenced by the American Abstract Expressionists during his tour of the U.S. in 1958. Certainly he shouted very loudly (and awkwardly) with his paint, but he was not captured by the external style of the genre, rather it liberated him somehow to be more himself. Immediately afterward his tour, he launched into his spiritual journey of the Elias series (1959-) which communicated his disquiet about religious belief and his beginning of spiritual doubt. His spirit was at work.

In one of her largest, and least 'colourful' works (*Floating Hours*, hanging in the Anthony Harper building, Cathedral Square), Popovici says the work is like a husk and should be seen as transparent, yet 'read'. Peering through the layers we discover the seed (or kernel of truth). Popovici seeks a 'radiography of seeing,' "99% of my painting is 'underneath' or 'within' the surface." Her layers of colour are seen as the pages of a book, and we are called upon to consider the testament and the message, rather than merely perceive words typed on a printed page.

In his deeply disturbing, yet arrestive, recent exhibition (*Set Fire To Self - Drown*, 2003) James Robinson assaults the calm, collected, respectable everyday beings of routine (Rockwell's Connoisseur in his pressed suit, holding umbrella and natty hat). He allows his angry, psychotic spirit to express itself in an orgy of Breugel or Bosch-like imagery woven as an abstract whole, like an "angry monster art that refuses to doze quietly on a gallery wall." Described variously by reviewers as, "nightmarish," "confrontational," "anarchic", John McDonald, director of *new contemporaries*, concludes an artist 'expressing a vision that no one, having seen, is not stirred and impressed by.' 2. The essence of Robinson is his spirit and his passion.

By its nature Abstract Expressionism is not narrative or literal. It cannot 'preach' as such, yet its unashamed vibrancy and emotional connection convey an immediate sense of spirit. Spirit is a much more powerful communicator, and like music, we capture a sense of the creative divine within us all through the medium of Abstract Expressionism.

From the earliest beginnings the human spirit and art have been entwined together. Abstract Expressionism is a yelling telling of the inner soul, combining spirituality with an abstract genre to express fictions that help us understand ourselves for the complex beings we are. Picasso was right.

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1. Marja Bloem, Martin Browne, Colin McCahon *A Question of Faith*, 2002.

2. John McDonald, *new contemporaries emerging Art in Australia catalogue*, Feb. 2003.