

LIFE, DEATH,
AND AWAKENING:
AS SEEN IN REFLECTIONS OF NATURE

by

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ABSTRACT

My objective, in undertaking this three year MFA degree has been to create and produce metaphorical paintings which communicate my deepest feelings about my personal experiences of life, death, and nature using various types of landscapes as subject matter. My goal has been to explore many processes of painting, using a range of color palettes to suggest and inspire emotional responses from viewers that are similar to my own. Ultimately my intention has been to share feelings of empathy between myself and a viewer through the art I've produced. This thesis body of work chronicles my three year journey.

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INTRODUCTION

The main inspirations that have formed my art come from my experiences of death, nature, and life. In part my life has been a turbulent sea, from the three decades of nursing my grandfather, grandmother, mother and husband, to their deaths. My occupation as a hospice nurse, has taken me to places where, emotionally, every home is its own storm. It has been difficult helping others with their transitions to the end; but there is also peace of mind, knowing I was there for them during the worst moments of their lives. These experiences have inspired my series of paintings, which are predominantly created using multiple shades and hues of blue. One of the artists who has influenced me is Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), who refers to blue as a heavenly color in his book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. The light to medium hues of blue - create a feeling of rest or peace, while darker blues echo emotions of grief.¹

I often work from nature, especially the ocean, river and forest. I am attuned to the vibrant colors, and the mesmerizing sounds and movements of nature's beauty. Life is a mystery. Where do we come from? How long will we live? What will the future bring? For me, when I am painting I reach deep into my heart and senses to escape into another realm that both heals me and infuses me with delight. Through my experiences with death, nature and life I have come to appreciate and realize every moment is precious. For me painting is a healing process and an opportunity to express visually, what I feel and know on the deepest levels.

¹ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. by M.T.H. Sadler (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1977), 38.

My objective, in undertaking this three year MFA degree has been to create and produce metaphorical paintings which communicate my deepest feelings about my personal experiences of life, death, and nature using various types of landscapes as subject matter. Starting with my early works in oil and acrylic paint on canvas, my efforts eventually turned to large paintings on paper. Finally in the past year, I returned to painting on canvas to explore various textures and expressive processes of applying paint to support my ideas.

Other Artist Influences and References

My art follows in the footsteps of a number of landscape artists. Beginning with the American Luminist painter Frederic Edwin Church who may have been emphasizing the ethereal in nature in his luminescent landscapes. There is a great deal of conjecture as to what the American Luminists sought to communicate. Three major influences upon the Luminists were: the Jacksonian manifest destiny philosophy, the Civil War, and the Transcendentalist school of thought. The tragedies of the Civil War directly related to the turbulent storm paintings. While the Transcendentalist school of thought, founded by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, relate to the inherent goodness of people and nature, and the idea of the power within individuals. “Luminist painting articulated a perception of nature in which, to quote Emerson, ‘the whole of nature is metaphor of the human mind.’”² The Jacksonian manifest destiny philosophy, which is the idea that people are blessed and destined to settle this beautiful land, led

² John Wilmerding, *American Light: The Luminist Movement 1850-1875* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1980), 11.

to the portrayal of grand and glorified American landscapes. These landscapes emphasized abundant resources, while the ideology itself instilled that anything is possible.

Like Frederick Edwin Church and other Luminist painters, I have tried to capture the ethereal in many of my seascapes and create metaphoric scenes using nature to depict human emotional states. However, I want the subjects of my paintings to be less illustrative and more obscure and ambiguous.

James Mallord William Turner (1775-1851) painted landscapes and seascapes, that were equally luminous but more obscure and mystical. He was a man ahead of his times, using new innovative painting techniques to capture the atmospheric conditions found in nature. He often used dramatic contrasts of dark cool colors against glowing reds. To paint a storm he needed to experience the storm, and thus he bound himself to the mast of a ship to experience the storm in all its fury in order to later paint it from memory. J.M.W. Turner's depiction of light as seen in his luminescent sunsets and misty sunrises would later influence the atmospheric paintings of the Impressionists painters.³ The Luminists and Impressionists inspired me to capture the many subtle and profound atmospheric effects of light in nature through the use of expressive paint and color contrasts. Other artists I admire include early Modernist painters known as the Stieglitz group, which was comprised of artists like Charles Demuth, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin and Georgia O'Keeffe. Alfred Stieglitz, who pioneered and established photography as an art form, was the primary supporter of this group of artists, hence the name the Stieglitz group. Of this group, two artists, Arthur Dove and John Marin, created landscapes and seascapes using these subjects to experiment with new techniques involving various degrees of representational

³ To see a sampling of J. M. W. Turner's works, go to [Turner – The Complete Works](#) website.

or abstracted images. John Marin constantly experimented, not following any of the practiced techniques during his time. He developed his own painting methods.⁴ Arthur Dove's paintings have a sensation of movement and because he departs and distorts his subjects, his works are considered to be the first American abstractions. In his art he experimented with various mediums - wax emulsion, tempera paint and gesso as a tool for adding and subtracting information. Many of his non-objective works are inspired by nature. These simplified organic forms emulate the oscillating rhythms in nature.⁵

Although many of my paintings are based on representational imagery, I always aim to distort reality. Like Dove and other abstract artists from the early modernist movements, I use acrylic and oil paints to explore and utilize watercolor techniques such as washes to create transparent areas. I also incorporate wax emulsion and gesso.⁶ I use the gesso instead of white paint because it is more opaque and will block out areas I no longer desire. The wax emulsion can either be scraped off or drawn into because it is applied into areas of the painting at the beginning. These additive and subtractive methods are important to my work because each time I start to paint I want a fresh start. Like erasing a black board, it is necessary to destroy areas of the painting by whitening them out or scraping areas off to recapture my spontaneity.

While Dove was the first American artist to paint non-objective or non-representational art, at the same time in Germany, the Russian born artist Wassily Kandinsky also began painting abstract compositions.⁷ Kandinsky influenced many other painters during his time through his

⁴ John Marin's works can be found on [The National Gallery of Art's](#) website.

⁵ Works by Arthur Dove can be found at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) website.

⁶ "Arthur Dove: Water, Wind, Metal," YouTube video, 35:57. Posted by "TerraAmericanArt," August 15, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYMu3gKAOPg>.

⁷ [The Guggenheim Museum](#) shows some of Wassily Kandinsky's works on their website.

writings. His philosophical views about art and painting in particular were influenced by mysticism and theosophy - or the seeking of direct knowledge of presumed mysteries of being and nature. Theosophy concerns the nature of divinity and eternal truth. In his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, he states that “the pure artist seeks to express only inner and essential feelings of the spirit.”⁸ Kandinsky wrote about the influences of color upon a person’s spirit and how the “artist makes works, which create vibrations within his soul.”⁹ He believed art to be direct expression of the spirit.¹⁰ Although I am most interested in Kandinsky’s interpretations of the meaning of color, I am not as focused on what an artist is or does according to his philosophy. However, my beliefs are similar because I seek enlightenment from the spirit in the subconscious.

This idea comes in part from my training in traditional Sumi painting under the guidance of my friend and teacher, Gloria Brightfield who taught Sumi painting at the Murikami Museum and Gardens in Delray Beach, Florida. In traditional Sumi painting, the process begins with an ancient Chinese healing energy exercise known as Qi Gong, which is similar to the Tai Chi. This is followed by slowly rubbing the sumi ink stick in water until the rich black ink, so essential to the creation of Sumi painting, is made. The next step involves meditating and listening to poetry read by the master teacher. The poetry reading describes the subject of the day. If we are to paint bamboo, the poetry is about bamboo. All the exercise and meditation is done in preparation for the artist’s reliance on the subconscious. When one begins to paint, not only is there a correct

⁸ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. by M.T.H. Sadler (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1977), 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

sitting posture, but also the breathing must be coordinated with each brush stroke. When one breathes in, the brush is dipped into the ink; when one breaths out, the brush stroke is made and the energy or chi is imparted into the painting.

During my lifetime, I have studied various schools of thought and religions. The ones that resonate the most with me are the Christian, Spiritualist, Buddhist and Unitarian. The Unitarian religion and philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau are in alignment with the idea of the artist's reliance upon the subconscious. Ralph Waldo Emerson was the son of a Unitarian minister and he along with his friend Henry Thoreau, founded the New England Transcendentalist school of thought. Both men referenced nature and the intertwining of everything - even a drop of rain as a microcosm of the universe.¹¹ Henry Thoreau's writing of *Walden*, or "*Life in the Woods*" is world renown. Ralph Waldo Emerson describes the relationship between God and man in the following quote, "the Eternal was stirring at their heart, working through their Hands, predominating in all their being."¹²

Other historical artists who have inspired me are William Blake, Charles Burchfield, April Gornik, David Bierk, and Anselm Keifer. William Blake, an English engraver, drew upon his visions to reveal an invisible dimension not seen within our everyday experience and to perceive mysteries beyond conscious perception. Blake was also a poet and printed his own illustrated poems, using his own printed images then adding color with watercolor. In some cases he claimed his deceased brother, Robert, communicated these inspirations to him. Maria Tsaneva, a

¹¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Transcendentalism: Essential Essays of Emerson & Thoreau*. (Delaware: Prestwick House, 2008), 1-8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 10.

biographer of many famous artists wrote in the foreward of her book, *William Blake: 101 Drawings and Illustrations*, “that Blake believed the visible world of the senses to be unreal, only an “envelope behind which the spiritual reality is concealed.””¹³ In his art he created visual symbolism to express his spiritual visions. Unfortunately, during his life time he was considered an eccentric, and never gained recognition until the nineteenth century.¹⁴

I am not a seer like Blake, but in my occupation as a hospice nurse I am drawn to the mysteries surrounding death and the ethereal realm. Many of my paintings use aspects of nature such as storms as a metaphor for the emotional turmoil of life and death.

Another artist who lived during the time of Dove and Marin and also worked with highly personal interpretations of beauty and the mysteries of nature is Charles Burchfield. Charles Burchfield is known to have spent as long as twenty years on a single painting by enlarging the size of the compositions by attaching more canvas or paper. His earliest and latest paintings were primarily created with watercolors in order to capture immediate sensations of experience. He painted transcendental landscapes, expressing the godliness in nature.¹⁵ Like Burchfield, I am attempting to capture the ethereal in nature.

Three recent artists, who have been pivotal in my understanding of the alignment of my work within the history of art and current practices in art, are contemporary artists David Bierk, April Gornik and Anselm Kiefer. David Bierk, who unfortunately died in 2002, was a great landscape

¹³ Maria Tsaneva, *William Blake: 101 Drawings and Illustrations*. (Morrisville, North Carolina: Lulu.com, 2014).

¹⁴ A list of William Blake’s works can be found on [the William Blake – The Complete Works](#) website.

¹⁵ Works by Charles Burchfield can be found at [DC Moore Gallery’s](#) website.

artist similar in style to J.M.W. Turner. His landscapes exhibit energy and movement as well as luminosity. Some of his paintings are in homage to historical artists such as Ingres and Vermeer.¹⁶ He actually created reproductions of their work in juxtaposition to his own landscapes of sunsets. It is unfortunate he died so young, robbing us of his future work.

April Gornik is currently painting atmospheric landscapes and seascapes, focusing on cloud formations. She states that part of her influences are from early Luminist painters like Fredrick Kensett, as well as contemporary artists like Anselm Kiefer. Gornik values art that has the ability to move a person emotionally and psychically.¹⁷

In my own paintings, I also desire to move people emotionally, so I very much identify with her drawings and paintings and share the influences of the Luminist movement and contemporary artist, Anselm Kiefer. Anselm Kiefer's work is grand and overwhelming. He is a contemporary great master. Anselm Kiefer works with multiple materials and media including photography, painting (oils, acrylics, gouaches, watercolors), found materials, book making, printmaking, sculpture, and installation art.¹⁸ Kiefer has stated that a large part of his art is a reparation for the atrocities done by the Nazis to the Jewish people (who controlled the German people) during World War II.¹⁹ (Royal Academy of the Arts, 2014). His work also examines other aspects of German history and culture. Kiefer's influence on my work has led to large-scale paintings with

¹⁶ David Bierk's works can be found at the [Diane Farris Gallery](#) website.

¹⁷ [April Gornik](#) hosts pictures of her own paintings on her website.

¹⁸ Anselm Kiefer's works can be found on [the Metropolitan Museum of Art's](#) website.

¹⁹ "Anselm Kiefer in conversation with Tim Marlow," YouTube video, 50:17. Posted by "Royal Academy of the Arts," April 2, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlm5tgistqA>.

heavier textures as I try to capture human emotion through surface manipulation and brush marks.

I will elaborate more on the artists who have influenced me as I review examples of my development in painting in my next section. However, my greatest inspiration has been nature, where I can experience, through my senses, a silencing or quieting of my soul. I am also profoundly inspired by my encounters with death, including my own near-death experience, the passing of loved ones, and patients. There is a great sadness and a frantic thirst for life at the very end. With respect to how I think about and am inspired by life, I believe there is an imprint upon our consciousness which was forged from all of the connecting atoms throughout the ages of all of our lives.

What is My Painting?

The most sincere way to describe painting for me is to convey that it is a process of discovery. At first there is an urgency for my body to resonate with the materials; in my case – paint, the brushes, the canvas or paper. When I express myself with paint; it is much like when one is at the beach watching the ocean tide ebb and flow. There is a sensation of moving into a state in which my body resonates with the medium. There is a silence as my body begins to react to the materials. It is as though my spirit emerges from this reaction and my heart quickens with energy as these internal and external immersions activate the creations of my paintings. The creative experience of an artist can be a wonderful sensual delight that emerges from this union in which one relies upon the subconscious through the process of making a painting. The materials silence the mind, for there is no storytelling. Instead the process of manipulating the materials guides the

exploration, transforming and expanding the act of discovery. Through this truth, the painting takes shape – effortlessly, seemingly out of the void. Sometimes, however, one’s ego interferes with the process and the mind breaks the silence. When that happens I must reach deep into my experiences to find the inspirations I need to move forward again. My paintings are a visual expression of my spirit and heart. We share no words with the other, only the sublime echoes of silence.

CHAPTER 1: OIL AND ACRYLIC PAINTINGS FROM THE FIRST YEAR

In many of my paintings I use nature as a metaphor for human emotions. My early paintings reference nature, especially the ocean, and are created with oil or acrylic paint on canvas. In my first work *Transcendence* (figure 1), one can see the distant sunrise, with a rolling plain of land much like an ocean wrapped in an early morning mist. My intention was to portray in the landscape the metaphor of the journey a soul takes as it leaves the body in death, or one might say the transition from death to rebirth in a new dimension. Just as in nature, we see the cycle of life reveal the death and rebirth of all things. I do not believe in the finality of death. Every dying patient I have known has invariably experienced the sight or presence of someone else to which they greet and talk to before his or her death. (You can't see who the patient sees; you can only see the patient.) For those who do not believe in an afterlife, there is still the scientific fact that the gene pool continues on in their descendants.

To experientially visualize this, like Turner, when he bound himself to the mast to experience the storm, I went on a hot air balloon ride at sunrise. I studied Turner's use of luminosity and incorporated this partially, but I did not use enough contrast, which would have made a more dramatic painting. The composition is horizontal, creating a sense of peace and stability. From studying Arthur Dove's work, I saw how the simplest forms or shapes were used to give a sense of ambiguity, so I used simple forms with no detail. The colors used were gradations from dark to light blue-green to create the illusion of distant depth and gradations from dark to light brown for earth tones. I also used darker browns in the foreground and glazes of yellow for the mist and distant depth. Opaque paint was used in the distance and oil glazes to create the misty

environment in the middle and foreground. The dominant color blue conveys a peaceful and serene spiritual message.



Figure 1: *Transcendence*, Oil on canvas 30” x 40”

The next paintings I created are related to storms. In my childhood I had many violent experiences related to storms. The following painting reflects my memories of a Tsunami I survived. The memory is still vivid. My baby brother is in a laundry basket beside my mother and I, as a small child, am trying to hold a mattress over a second story window while water pours in. In the painting *Memory* (figure 2), one sees a storm with dark clouds and pouring rain; there is a turbulent sea in the foreground and distant mountains in the background. In between the dark clouds one sees light. The intension was to use the storm as a metaphor for the adversity and sadness one encounters in life. The composition is not horizontal nor is it vertical creating uncertainty and tension. Again, I used simplified forms like Arthur Dove to accent the uncertainty that also added ambiguity. I experimented with the use of multiple washes with drips and short brush strokes to accent movement and the feeling of the wet deluge of rain and wind.

This painting is almost monochromatic – composed of gradations of blue, only a hint of yellow ochre and brown. The dominant dark blues convey sadness, the lighter blue conveys hope, and the drips of rain suggest tears.



Figure 2: *Memory*, Acrylic on canvas 30”x 40”

The painting, *Of Sky and Water* (figure 3), portrays a violent sea meeting the sky, which has dark clouds on one side and a calm sun light area on the other. It represents the birth of a great storm. Metaphorically the storm is emotional, beyond the ordinary – an image that is more than merely sky, water, and land. It is my intention in this work to create an image that expresses the sacredness of the earth: the power, the grandeur, the turbulence, and the serenity. There is a vertical composition based on an X. The diagonals of the X create movement. Although the colors are gradations of blue with touches of pink and yellow, it is not calm or peaceful. In this case, the image continues to suggest the spiritual by using an undercurrent of great movement

that is actually controlled. Multiple oil glazes were used to convey the wet rain and wind. The forms were simplified but had more detail than the previous painting.



Figure 3: *Sky & Water*, Oil on canvas 5'x 4'

Edge of Life (figure 4) is a painting of a large mass of water with a waterfall and an even greater mass of land which the water appears to be pouring into. I studied Fredrick Edwin Church's, *Cotopaxi* and William Blake's, *Pity*, to capture both catastrophic effects and serenity and to convey the metaphor of the edge of life. It is a horizontal composition divided into three horizontal bands, the center band cutting through the bottom band, which changes the horizontal quietude into an ambiguous uncertainty and thus adds tension. In this painting I started exploring

techniques to combine washes with heavy textures through the use of a gel medium added to the paint; a process I continue today. This contrast of washes versus heavy texture added tension. I continued using drips using blue and red hues. The dominant colors are blue, green with brown earth tones. Red was a subordinate color and was only used to accent and move the eye around the composition. The contrast of warm reds and earth tones against cool blues and greens added to the tension. While I was painting this piece I was reading about the legendary Atlantis and its' sudden catastrophic annihilation by nature. During the making of this painting, I participated in Earth Day in Orlando and my thoughts were of the fathomless pollution of the earth. To me, the work illustrates the violation of the earth – expressed by the drips of crying water and the bleeding earth.



Figure 4: *Edge of Life*, Acrylic on canvas 4'x 5'

In *Leaving the Storm* (figure 5), an ocean scene moving from rough seas into the distant calm water is depicted. From the horizon, moving downward are drips as if they are falling beneath the water. There are dark and light clouds in the sky. The scene is a metaphor for transition from difficult times to peaceful times. Sadness is still to come, but hope is on the horizon. I studied John Marin's drips and explored confining the drips to only one part of the painting. By doing this I produced an unsettling feeling of hidden sadness. The composition is horizontal which is peaceful, but the drips change the mood by adding tension. There are oil glazes and opaque areas both in warm and cool colors, which move the eye around the composition of the canvas. The experiment with controlled drips added a subdued feeling of sadness.



Figure 5: *Leaving the Storm*, Oil on canvas, 30”x 40”

The painting, *Hope* (figure 6), is a seascape that portrays the sensation of leaving a storm and emerging into peaceful waters. The intension is to convey the metaphor of a transition in life to a new awakening and hope. I studied both J.M.W. Turner's and David Bierk's luminous seascapes. The composition is horizontal with a peaceful mood portrayed. There are both warm and cool colors and strong dark and light contrasts that suggest a foreboding mood. I experimented with opaque color and glazes and some controlled drips while also blending colors in specific places on the canvas to create transitions.



Figure 6: *Hope*, Oil on canvas, 30"x 40"



Figure 7: *Passage*, Acrylic on canvas, 30'' x 40''

Reflecting on death and rebirth, I painted *Passage* (figure 7). On a personal level, the souls of my deceased family members and the many patients I have known – are moving towards the light.

Universally this scene is of all humanity. The drips represent tears of grief. The composition has a partial X with three bands and is horizontal, emphasizing peace. The top band, a dark sky, is a metaphor for the power of the spirit. The middle band zig zags having a strong diagonal movement. The colors in this middle band are bright yellow-oranges, there are yellow-orange orbs moving into the distance. The third band is horizontal with brown earth tones, hidden within these brown tones are human figures.

Beginning a Great Journey (figure 8) offers a glimpse of a moment, which I had to purge from myself, because of the horrifying memory - a discovery of a bloody and violent death. In it I illustrated the angel of death saving the painful, suffering soul.



Figure 8: *Beginning a Great Journey*, Oil on canvas, 4'x 5'

When I painted this image, I again studied the atmospheric and luminescent effects in the land and seascapes of J.M.W. Turner. Most of my focus was on his watercolors because I used multiple washes much like his thin layers of transparent paint. During my studies of his work, I copied a number of his watercolor paintings portraying Venice and other places during various storms.

Euphoria (figure 9) is about my own near death experience as a child, when I was drowning and beginning to surrender to death. In that euphoric moment I experienced what many like me have recalled, in which I saw my whole life unfold like a film-play before me.



Figure 9: *Euphoria*, Acrylic on canvas, 30”x 24”

My near death experience depicted in this painting reminds me of what the artist, Anselm Kiefer, said during an interview with Tim Marlow of the Royal Academy of the Arts: “It’s like in the cosmos - it’s always construction, demolition, reconstruction – all the stars who die and some others are born, always like this. Who is responsible? Who started this at the beginning? We don’t know why we are here? We don’t know where we go? It’s quite desperate, no? Because there is an intellect to try and find out and we cannot.”²⁰

²⁰ Royal Academy of the Arts, 14:50.

CHAPTER 2: WORKS ON PAPER

A series of eight paintings on paper with an approximate size of 7' x 4' each were created using commercial acrylic paint because it allowed me to work larger at a reduced cost. *Long Day* (figure 10) is a sunset landscape. It is ambiguous with simple forms, which was inspired by Arthur Dove's use of simple forms. The composition is horizontal, which is peaceful; I used a long diagonal to portray a sense of movement and the illusion of depth. The colors are predominantly warm yellows and brown earth tones with some greens. I was simply interested in conveying an ambiguous but symbolic landscape using a new pallet of yellow and brown earth tones. I struggled to paint quickly as I attempted to blend colors as I had done with professional quality oils and acrylic paints. I discovered the commercial acrylic paints to be very limiting with their watery and quick drying chemistries.



Figure 10: *Long Day*, Acrylic on paper 3' x 7'

Of Coming and Going (figure 11) is a diptych that involves the form of a bird that appears to be either coming out or going into an off center and circular vortex. The intention was to represent, through the act of painting, a sensation of finding my spirit during the many hours involved in the actual processes of painting. The religious scholar, poet, and Sufi mystic, Rumi, who lived between 1207-1273, suggests this idea well in the following quote: “I can’t explain the goings or the comings – you enter suddenly and I am nowhere inside the majesty.”²¹



Figure 11: *Coming and Going*, Acrylic on paper 7’x 4’

In these paintings, the compositions are vertical suggesting upward movement, there is a circular void that is off-center, which may appear to be water, and the dominant color is blue with splashes of red.

²¹ Coleman Barks, *Rumi the Book of Love* (Harper Collins Publishers, 2003), 36.



Figure 12: *Nature Spirit*, Acrylic on paper, 7'x 4'

Nature Spirit (figure 12) is from my memory of a great two hundred year old tree, which was the size of four large trees. I frequently walk by this tree and always stop to experience its grandeur. It represents great strength, fortitude and beauty and that is the intention of this painting. The composition is vertical which adds to the organic circular movement of the abstracted tree form. The dominant color is blue-green symbolic of peace, the subordinate colors are gradations of pink, violet, and peach symbolic of love, spirit and energy.



Figure 13: *Presence, Acrylic on paper, 7' x 4'*

Presence (figure 13) is a painting in which my intention was to convey the persevering quietude inside me when I am in the midst of an emotional storm. It reflects my work with hospice, and the emotional stress of entering into a home where someone is dying. This painting is completely non-objective and abstract. The composition suggests a vertical projecting movement, the forms are at a diagonal, which also suggests movement. There are multiple diagonals within the work, and the colors are balanced between cool blues and warm oranges and reds. The simplified forms and colors of the early organic non-objective paintings of Wassily Kandinsky inspired this painting.

CHAPTER 3: RECENT PAINTINGS

After experimenting with commercial paints and low grade large paper surfaces, my recent paintings were all created with professional acrylic paints on canvas or high quality paper, which have actual texture that I developed with acrylic gel medium, acrylic modeling paste and wax emulsion. My processes involve using washes of transparent layers of paint and applying and scraping off textures in additive and subtractive ways. I work with professional acrylic paint and various gel mediums and modeling pastes because they combine well to create the surfaces I need.



Figure 14: *Ascend*, Acrylic modeling paste on canvas, 4'x 3'

Ascend (figure 14) is almost entirely a sky scene, with only a small portion of land and sea at the bottom of the canvas. The composition is horizontal emphasizing movement in the painting. The work is predominantly composed of cool blues and violet colors. It employs a strong yellow diagonal movement into the sky, with vertical controlled drips. I experimented with light modeling paste to create an impasto texture that moves around the painting. In the painting, *Ascend*, I reflected upon my earlier Sumi-e paintings. The metaphor is the soul or spirit ascending into a heavenly realm.



Figure 15: *Spirit Orbs*, Acrylic on canvas, 40”x 30”

The work *Spirit Orbs* (figure 15) is similar in meaning to *Ascend* - both relate to the transition of a soul. *Spirit Orbs*, is a scene of a misty sea with a dark sky that has large orange yellow fiery areas. There are four orbs moving toward the fiery areas, one disappearing into it. The painting is a metaphor for the soul's transition to a spiritual realm. The composition is vertical emphasizing the movement up. There are spheres which abstractly represent souls which are also placed on a diagonal plane, adding to the tension and movement. The colors are contrasting warm orange-yellows against cool blues. I referenced William Blake's spiritual scenes and David Bierk's luminous paintings. The techniques used were acrylic washes and opaque paints.

The painting *Forest with River* (figure 16) has layers of meaning. First, it is a reflection of the nature spirits and secondly, it is a metaphor for the twilight of one's life, the uncertain end of life.



Figure 16: *Forest with River*, Acrylic on canvas, 30"x 40"

The scene is of a misty forest next to a river. There are plants and vines all around. The composition is horizontal emphasizing restfulness, the trees add verticals to imply movement, and the colors are greens and yellows. I experimented with the creation of a watercolor-like illusional texture using puddles of paint, adding cling-wrap to shape and separate the puddles. The painting *Forest* (figure 17) is a scene in a woods, the composition is vertical for movement, there is a large X and multiple diagonals for directional movement around the canvas, the colors green and yellow symbolize balance, energy and motion. There is a fracturing of light to convey the metaphor of the transmutation in nature; another layer of meaning is the transmutation of human emotion. I referenced Charles Burchfield's nature paintings because I see not only the representation of human emotion within them but also the godliness in nature.



Figure 17: *Forest*, Acrylic, modeling paste on canvas, 30"x 40"

Storm (figure 18) is a painting on paper of the mysterious wild sea, taken from my imagination. This painting attempts to capture the excitement and peace I experience when I am in nature. It also simultaneously is a reflection of how I feel when I paint. My goal was to suggest an intense immersion through my senses between the paint and my heart using improvisational painting. The work was done with gradations of blue, and is horizontal to suggest restfulness, peace and spirituality.

The lines and shapes although ambiguous lead the mind to imagine a seascape. *Storm* was a truly effortless creation.



Figure 18: *Storm*, Acrylic and wax emulsion on paper, 24"x 30"



Figure 19: *Touch of Spirit*, Acrylic, modeling paste, wax emulsion on canvas, 8.5'x 6'



Figure 20: Study for *Touch of Spirit*

Touch of Spirit (figure 19) is a surreal scene: of a heavy dark sky which literally has a heavy impasto texture applied to the canvas. In it is a diagonal misty foreground, off center is a large drip wash representing the touch of a spirit. The composition is dominantly blue to suggest

spirituality, with touches of yellow and orange to add warmth and suggest a human element. These warm colors enhance the mood. It is vertical composition with multiple diagonals giving one the feeling of a peaceful movement. I experimented with the application of light modeling paste and wax emulsion to the canvas to add texture, and then I combined the washed areas with textured areas. By scraping off textures, painting and adding more textures, I referenced Anselm Kiefer's process. This scene is a metaphor for the antechamber a soul goes to before moving into another dimension.



Figure 21: *Tempest*, Acrylic, modeling paste, wax emulsion on canvas, 7'x 8'9"

The painting, *Tempest* (figure 21), expresses the deep emotions of the soul through the power of nature. It depicts a violent seascape with a distant area of calm clouds and sea. The circular

patterns symbolize the union of man with the eternal. In my mind I see the turbulence and many obstacles of life symbolized by the churning sea in this painting. The splatters of red relate to the blood of life. Hope is seen in the distant area of calm sea and clouds. The composition is horizontal emphasizing peace in contrast to the multiple circular forms, which activate movement; the color is in the many values of analogous blues, which emphasize the spiritual. I created a large brush, by screwing together multiple brushes with brackets. This brush enabled me to convey through the large stroke a turbulent sea. Washes of thin colors created luminosity and the illusion of depth. Both light modeling paste and wax emulsion were applied to create textures but in some cases some of the texture was scraped off and more paint was reapplied. Kiefer's influence upon me has led to my work on large-scale paintings, with heavier textures, in an attempt to capture more emotion. The latest paintings *Tempest* (figure 21) and *Touch of Spirit* (figure 19), which are approximately 7'x 8'9" and 8' x 6', are large with impasto surfaces. They do not compare with the large-scale works by Kiefer but they are an attempt to move in that direction.

I was fortunate to see an exhibition of Anselm Kiefer's work at the Nova University Museum Gallery in Fort Lauderdale. Kiefer is one of the greatest contemporary artists of our time, and although I was familiar with his paintings and sculptures, it was not until I saw the sheer scope and enormity of his scale (many of the paintings 20' in height by 30' or 50' wide) that I understood them on a deeper level. Even the heavy textured surface of five to seven inches was overwhelming to comprehend and experience.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting upon the development of my painting in this three-year MFA program reveals my transition from painting familiar subjects of nature into creating improvisational and mythical imagery based on visual metaphors.

My earlier paintings were taken from photographs of nature that inspired me, an example being the painting, *Transcendence*. The next period of paintings were developed from memories that had created deep impacts upon my worldview. Following that, was an experimental period exploring new imagery and processes that were more spontaneous and improvisational and were based on more abstract ideas, using commercial acrylic paint on paper. During the final period of this MFA, I worked on canvas and used professional acrylic paints, to express and search for the spiritual meaning of life.

My work expresses the cycles of life and death, and how all things within nature move towards the transition into dust. My paintings are a search for who or what we are, and what in time will all of life become?

Throughout this time spent in the graduate program, I feel that my artwork continued to grow and transform much further beyond what I would have accomplished on my own. It is here that I was given the opportunity to both create my own spiritual paintings and involve myself with fellow artists who encouraged me to broaden my horizons. This glorious journey brought forth an enlightenment that inspired a hunger to use canvas and paint to tell my story, and it opened my eyes to the world unseen through the naked glance. This entire exploration of painting in this program has prepared me for creating and producing paintings, which I hope will continue to

convey my deepest emotions about the most important experiences in my life, including the death of others and the grandeur of nature around us all. I explored the deepest levels of painting including many non-traditional techniques while using a range of color palettes to spark and arouse emotional responses from my audience. My hope was to share empathy, between myself as an artist and the viewers of my art. That has been my three-year odyssey.

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