

An Explanation from Within - Daniel Morphy

Ideas behind the drawings are generated by letting the imagination go to work in a kind of discursive way; dreams and random imaginary figments, fantastic or unexpected combinations of things and explorations of the counter-intuitive are given momentary life and scribbled down randomly in a sketch book which serves as a source for future work.

This mining of the unconscious was also practiced by the original surrealists who, in various ways, sought a significance beyond what could be expressed or conceived of in a rational way, in dreams and the unconscious: 'surreal' = 'super-real', i.e. over or beyond the *real* or the *rational*. What they called a 'psychic automatism' which followed no pre-conceived plan or convention. This, non-religious, or even anti-religious agenda might arguably be turned around and given a religious one in terms of the 'mystery' of the unknowable God entered into by many visionaries and prophets. I cannot claim any such high title, but it could be claimed that if the unconscious is to be explored, then the unconscious can also be informed. A mind which has been formed over time by faith and has investigated scripture and theological themes will reflect this, not only in conscious thought, but also in the unconscious. For instance, the symbolism of marine bio-forms with its shells, claws, tentacles, fronds and even stings has, for a long time, held a positive spiritual significance for me in a way that I find hard to explain. Anthropomorphic animals have likewise inhabited the collective psyche throughout history, from the gods of ancient Egypt to Winnie the Pooh & Bugs Bunny, and make repeated appearances in my work.

It should be kept in mind that this work is *symbolism*, not *allegory*. The symbols cannot be textually decoded allegorically on a one to one basis; they cannot be explained in so many words. Symbolism is where the pictorial image *as such* is a necessary part of that which is to be assimilated; meanings are layered, elusive and many. A religious artist living in a non-religious culture might then want to look beyond 'traditional' religious images, seeing their appeal, at least in part, as an exoticism imported from another culture, the past. Instead, this artist may want to plumb the collective mind of his own culture, as embedded in his own mind, informed by many things from childhood onwards, not only by religion but by recent history, technology, mass media, pop music, comic strips...

So, when I began to take the idea of making art seriously in the early '80's, I was drawn to the American 'adult' comic strip art of the likes of Robert Crumb, Art Spiegelman and others. The art of 'counter culture', of the less respectable fringes which 'Christian culture', such as it is, has tended to shy away from and in doing so has not yet succeeded in addressing an important and underrated aspect of how we are now and, to that extent, the mainstream. Culture starts with counter-culture; it moves in from the fringes.

In the paintings I am trying to work out the relationship between line drawing and painting, since I base the latter on the former. Some of the drawings work in a very simple linear way; others are more densely worked and seem to call for more developed treatment in paint. But what does paint add to the drawing? Is it a mere 'filling in' and thus beside the point or does it add something? It has been suggested that what is good about the line drawing is lost under all that paint. I am inclined to think that something may be lost but something else is gained; but what? The 'expressionistic' way I paint does not naturally like being constricted to the rather strict confines of the drawing; there is something of a contest between them. This contest creates problems, the problems find solutions and so something new happens.

On some recent paintings & drawings:

Two Paintings:

Quaerens came from a sketchbook image which was quite close to the finished painting down to indications to the colours; although I changed the green sky to blue. This was not so much a conformity to realism, but a desire to limit the palette to 4 colours: prussian blue, alizarin crimson, yellow ochre & white. I was attempting to explore the contrast between the more suppressed 'illustrational' technique of the foreground image and the expressive 'painterly' background. It was more or less fortuitous and, against expectations, worked. I would not like to work this way regularly lest it becomes a 'technique' and consequently lifeless, but am happy with the way this turned out. The bunny could be me or anyone who feels like identifying with it. 'Quaerens' means 'seeking', seeking what? How to paint? Is it a pilgrimage?

The Secret Place; the title, and to some extent the mood, was inspired by an album by Julianna Barwick: The Magic Place. I initially imagined a figure in a field of flowers behind a floating pond. This developed and changed through many sketches in my notebook; it became a floating pond in a wood with the White Rabbit from Alice in Wonderland running beneath it; it became the pond with the rabbit sitting behind it on a hillock, with a girl in a flowery dress & specs behind it. Unlike Quaerens, it was all worked out as it went, a bit of a struggle – I couldn't get the flowers & foreground right; eventually it became what we now see, an amalgamation of ad hoc solutions. There is a shell boat in the floating pond and a fountain coming out of the shell into the pond which overflows on the right creating a stream running into a 'buried' shell at the

bottom. The figure is a kind of humanoid teddy, it could easily have been a bunny. It is a secret place which the grown ups don't know about, where a child playing at being an animal unknowingly meets God.

Three Drawings:

Chorus. A take on the 'living creatures', or seraphim, in the theophany that recurs in the visions of Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1 and Revelations 4. Mighty animal headed angelic beings that surround the throne of God. This apocalyptic standard of the Bible has appealed to me for along time and here I have subjected the residue it had left in my imagination to a thorough make-over in terms of a personal, if idiosyncratic, symbolism.

Dream. I actually did dream this or, at least, what turned into this. I was in the basket of a hot air balloon in rapid flight above a dense oak forest; I was going somewhere wonderful. Eventually we (the balloon had an intention of its own) plunged into the dark forest and swiftly flew along a beaten path, crossed with roots, between the trees, the great oaken trunks twisting this way and that; ever onwards to the wonderful place...

Reworking the idea made the balloon into a luminous Goofy balloon head, the basket into a levitating shell and myself (is it me?) into a teddy. There is a distant city of shells. The New Jerusalem? The Emerald City? The Wonderful Place we dream of?

Angel gathers up two dream-derived images and presents them as a kind of seraph of the theophany described in 'Chorus'. In one dream I was running along a path by the sea. On my right side sandy beach and ocean; on my left a sort of cliff of 10' or so. Only this was an organic formation consisting of a huge running 'hedge' of stacked marine invertebrates. Tentacles, claws, mollusc frond forms, great sea anemones, stinging things, shell forms – all squelching and waving and reaching out to me. Intensely, ecstatically beautiful and seriously dangerous at the same time. These were the People of God in their present human state of imperfection, I desired to be with them and feared them at the same time.

The other dream was of gazing into a rock pool, packed with the boiling life of the kind of marine forms described above; deep and dark red, dangerous and desired, under the still sheen of the water surface. Should I reach down into it?

Daniel Morphy, June 2021