

PRIMORDIAL FLOW: An exchange between Tobias Pils and Richard Shiff

May 4, 2019
Dear Richard,

I came up with these thoughts. Do you have a short answer or idea in reply?

Looked at as a whole, these paintings might not make any sense. The little parts do. They stick to each other. They fit organically without questioning. Like one day gives to the other. There are weeks, there are years. A painting can be a life.

The brush, the paint, the canvas, the paper offer the limitations to realize this. Out of love, dirt, and the willingness to take the chance of destruction, the ideas can vanish. To make space for something primordial.

May 18, 2019
Dear Tobias,

Your suggestive remarks suit the exploratory nature of your work, and my reply has become not short but a bit long. One exploration produces another.

I see that your new images flow laterally, part to part across the surface of the canvas or paper—figure to figure, figure to pattern, pattern to pattern, pattern to figure. Also: a solid passes into a void; a line of division establishes a rhythmic interval. These are local relationships, "the little parts." Your images are like trains of thought with multiple linkages, or like isolated thoughts that generate diverse implications—images or thoughts that never reach a determinate end. I'll let my own thoughts flow along with your images—laterally.

As I view these new works, many of the links I perceive arise as intuitions that require no logical justification. Am I sharing your intuitions?—this might be impossible to verify. Viewing becomes a process of yielding my own sense of logic to the alien logic—the non-logic of your imagery. With each return to an individual work, the narrative configuration that I struggle to discern, always unstable, changes. The local, somewhat discrete areas of your large compositions are singular events that displace other events. This happens without any rational order or sequence emerging, as if chance were becoming the determining factor.

You say that "the little parts ... stick to each other." I recall C. S. Peirce's fundamental understanding of the movement of temporality, which he would identify as the course of an "event": "What, then, is a real event? It is an existential junction of impossible facts. ...

context? This is unlikely, since your themes pertain to your daily observations, interests, and concerns. You would not have painted breastfeeding or pool unless you had observed some aspect of the scenes that you invent for these works, however fanciful they may be. Yet these observations (as in pool, for example) seem free-flowing—at least for a viewer like myself. Though identifiable, they seem universal rather than tied to a specific context. They may be the record of "one day gives to the other," both in daily life and, more significantly, in the studio where a sequence of works appears from under your brush ("the brush, the paint, the canvas, the paper offer the limitations," you say). The sensation of passage—"one day gives to the other"—is universal. It amounts to a sensation of time that is timelessly non-specific, a flow of time that lacks historical significance. It is the transience of life, nothing more—the flow alone, devoid of historical markers.

What, then, is the proper "time" of your paintings? They seem to course through their own linkages, as microcosms of lived temporality ("the little parts ... fit organically"). Yet, if the time of your images is primordial—or if you at least offer a glimpse of the primordial—your works must bring temporality to a standstill. The time of your Peire-ean "events" slips away from any rational understanding. In this respect, I recall one of Walter Benjamin's formulations: "Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock."² (Here, Benjamin used a word alien to traditional German—Chock—perhaps a linguistic shock in itself.) An instance of shock is a moment of intensified awareness. Yet this consciousness lacks continuity. It connects to no logical, narrative train of perceptual experience. It is consciousness out of time, returning to primordial timelessness. Your paintings have organic links but no encompassing pictorial order of a conventional kind: you create orthogonals but no grid, planes but no perspective, space but no recession, tonality but no chiaroscuro. The organic life-force evident in your art—enhanced by your oblique references to contemporary life—re-enters pre-history. This constitutes a contradiction for history but not for art.

Your "primordial" imagery acts on a viewer in lieu of explaining a situation or even merely representing it. Representation is too much of a secondary condition—too dependent on a context of understanding—to suit the state of your imagery, which is primary in its materiality and its graphic insistence, its aggressiveness. There are figures marked as female and as male—for example, in the painting you title couple—but they fail to represent coherent bodies. The "idea" of a gendered body seems to shift even as the figures emerge as "little parts [that] stick together." The nominal male figure in couple becomes a crescent moon. The imprint of the tread of your shoe, left on the canvas as you work, violates the integrity of this figure, introducing "dirt."

The penultimate sentence of your commentary invokes conditions that are decidedly primary, even primordial: "Out of love, dirt and the willingness to take the chance of destruction ..." "Love" addresses the separation of subject from object and reduces the two elements to an immersive hybrid: the love relation can exist between any consciousness and any other entity, organic or inorganic. Love can bring a person to identify with another person, but also to identify with nature, to be part of nature. "Dirt" is a collective term that

Though the two inferences cannot be combined, they can be joined. ... An event always involves a junction of contradictory inferences in the subjects existentially the same."¹ Within your compositions, similar figures join but do not combine into coherence. Each element among the many is an event within a context that remains something less than a time-bound history. I don't know whether the figures I perceive are "existentially the same"—subjects that persist in time, each with its own life—or are imagined personages that assume different identities as they occupy their various pictorial locations. Your images play games with identity, with sameness and difference, with space and time.

Looking at the image that you title the lost egg or the one that you title the chain, I imagine a meditation on evolution or perhaps human fetal development, which passes through bestial stages. I remain free, nevertheless, to link the elements of these complexes of images in virtually any order. You create evolutionary narratives that lack a timeline—pseudo-histories that precede the institution of time. In your paintings, evolution can move backwards.

Accordingly, your pictorial "order" (this pseudo-order) follows no obvious structural rules. In night on earth, your graphic stars vary in their number of points, from four (one too few to be "correct") to seven (one too many to be "correct"). Each of these irregular star-figures appears as a spontaneous creation, out of a surrounding void, itself being generated by black pigment. Your "stars" follow no cultural or graphic convention.

"Primordial" is your crucial term, consistent with the timelessness of your imagery. Black and white as dark and light: this is already an instance of primordial differentiation, both mythical and biblical. What you say—"to make space for something primordial"—causes me to wonder how we might succeed in realizing, or becoming conscious of, a primordial substance, condition, or sensation. We are already so cultured, so ideological. Culture and ideology structure us as creatures of habit, far removed from the unformed condition of anything primordial. Ideology lies at the far end of whatever range of experience includes the primordial at its opposite or antithetical end. I ask myself what might support such a range of experience (from the primordial to the cultural or ideological). The obvious answer is the passage of time, for time equates to different qualities of experience. There are different "times." At one extreme, we experience the primordial as if it were timeless, whereas the ideological is bound to a configured time, a historical time, a context. Yet you claim that "ideas can vanish." The "ideas" or conceptual context of an ideology are themselves markers of time. Once an ideology has taken hold, its ideas remain in place, as if permanently valid. Such intellectual constructs are the rules people live by: ideology as another form of the timeless—as timeless natural law. But a work of art can become the counterforce to established rule, presenting an alternative to a "natural" order already long accepted.

The primordial has no historical context because it pre-exists the historical forces that would establish a context. When I imagine a time of no context, I also imagine, in opposition, a time that hardly seems to flow because it has become rigidified by behavioral habit and ideological thought. Through your art, Tobias, do you somehow deny all trace of

signifies all materiality – the collective substance from which both a subject and an object emerge, only to converge in "love." And "the willingness to take the chance of destruction" is what we call "risk" – an assertion of organic will in a situation of unknown potential.

Within history, especially modern history, artists have been designated as cultural risk-takers. But nature also takes risks: it is a force of entropy and mutation as much as of "natural law." The artist's risk involves more than merely challenging and modifying pictorial conventions. In your case, with the local "fit" of your quirky "little parts," you risk a more general coherence – narrative coherence, historical coherence, ideological coherence. It seems that you do this for the sake of attaining primordial love from within the primordial dirt of painting.

¹ Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Logic of Mathematics; an attempt to develop my categories from within: Triads" (c. 1896), *Collected Papers*, ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks, 8 vols. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1958–1960), 1:263 (original emphasis).

² Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940, thesis XVII), *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 262.