

Out of the Heart of Light

by Mark Daniel Cohen

Julie Hedrick: Awakening

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On the future of aesthetics



Julie Hedrick: *Awakening*
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Those who believe our thinking is free of the constraints of mythological patterns have not bothered to observe the bars on the cage—or have not been driven to. Those who take the inevitable sensation that we are free in our thoughts as hard evidence, who believe the thing must be what it seems to be from within, are captured in category confusion and attempting to create a Möbius strip of a proof. An element of a system cannot stand as an uninflected observation of the status of the system—it is impeached by whatever indicts the system as a whole. Every thought is biased by what thinks it. It rolls with the tilt of the lawn. One will feel free if one is, or if one is compelled to, and the difference will be undetectable—from the interior.

No thought can reliably assess its own nature. However, thoughts can be taken as samplings of the system. They are evidence as example, although not as conclusion—one can think about thought, all thoughts but the one in which one considers the nature of thought. *That* thought stands ever and inevitably behind its own back, or behind the eyepiece of its own microscope, never under its own gaze. Which is to say that we can estimate the nature of thought by recalling what we have thought, taking it as symptomatic, as behavioral, and looking for the pattern.

The patterns of thought appear to be narrative. Regardless of the manner of thought examined, there is a meaningful sense in which we are always telling stories. Even logical arguments, fugitive mullings, reveries, mathematical proofs, and a series of paintings communicate more effectively and compellingly the more they approach the structure of a story. (It is a thing good writers know: that reader interest is dependent upon suspense, upon establishing a desire to see how things end—there must always be a drive towards a strong finish, a final payoff for the writer's audacity in demanding the reader expend continuous attention on accumulating information.) The story need not be, and essentially is not, the telling of a yarn—it is rather a formal device, an organizing principle, a pattern for the arranging of information of any kind. What matters is that a circle is closed, that a conclusion is reached, that a promise embedded at the beginning of the dispensation of data is returned to and fulfilled at the end, which is the determining characteristic of an end. It is the same as saying that all thought works in the form of a mystery, and the thought is complete when the solution to the compounding of clues is disclosed.

Even so, the structural patterns of information exchange are naturally filled in by the imagination with narrative content, with basic stories laid out in broad strokes, or more, story themes that are the essential forms of imagination, of comprehension: creation, apotheosis, deterioration, the descent into chaos. These are the mythic patterns, the essential forms that structure our thought. And the stories appear to be limited in number. In essence, we keep telling the same stories to ourselves. We tell them, over and over again, in everything we think.

Half a century ago, Northrop Frye published a seminal work of literary analysis, *Anatomy of Criticism*, in which he proposed a theory of archetypal criticism that had all of world literature falling into a circular pattern of four forms, forms that make a single system. The forms or essential stories relate to four stages of human life: birth, marriage, old age, and death. They relate as well to the four parts of the day—morning, noon, evening, and night—the four seasons, beginning with spring, and four literary modes—comedy, romance, tragedy, and farce. Taken together, they constitute a cycle, each form leading into the next, and ultimately, beginning again: night leading into morning, winter leading into spring, farce leading into comedy—death leading into life. Taken together, they constitute a single story: the story of an individual life, of a society, of human civilization—of the life cycle. Taken together, they constitute the one story we keep telling ourselves in all we think, the story of life aging into mortality and then rebirth—the track along which our thoughts run, our essential myth.

Of course, there is no suggestion that we travel, even imaginatively, around the lap of the circadian, seasonal, transcendental circuit—only that, in everything we think, conceive, dream up, we tell a story that lies somewhere along the circumference, and that all the mental products of civilization, compounded together and by now, this far into civilization, do not exhaust the possibilities of expression but, instead, complete the circle. (For Frye is not a Post-Structural theoretician but now stands as one of our best alternatives.)

The point of the circle is not that we complete the round. Rather, it has no point, it is a descriptive, not a prescriptive, category—a scientific concept. But there is the tendency to move ahead along the lap, to go on to some part of the next stage when a culture—thinkers, which is often what we mean by that word—feel(s) an imaginative, artistic, even philosophical mode is exhausted: tragedy does tend to be followed by the chaos of farce (whether comic farce or dark, whether Dada or *Moby Dick*), romance leads toward tragedy (*Romeo and Juliet* contains the movement in itself), farce tends to move into comedy (Aristophanes being followed by the New Comedy of Menander), and so forth.

The Frye model thus may be employed to see where we are, and what the more likely next alternatives are. So, where are we? In visual art, over the last

50 years, we have moved from abstract painting to the varieties and vagaries of Post-Modern art, and with artists such as Julie Hedrick, we are seeing something new, something that makes perfect sense along the verge of the Frye system.

The method and function of abstraction is to disassemble the world, to dissolve its appearances—to take it to pieces. It is a tragic movement in the purely descriptive sense, which is Frye's sense—form breaks down into formlessness. But the emotional tonality follows of necessity from the formal execution, and we should recall that, in a jointly written statement, Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman observed: "There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless." If one does not sense the tragedy of standing before the works of these artists—the tragedy of "human destiny before the infinite," as Ramez Qureshi wrote of Rothko's art—one has not learned to see Abstract Expressionism.

As abstraction moved to color field painting, as the gestural elements became removed and the flat tonal expanse became the articulation, the imaginative sense of things shifted from tragedy to farce—one could feel the thrashing about falling away, like a swimmer going under. It is not a judgmental and certainly not a pejorative term—it is purely descriptive: of the immersion in formlessness, and in chaos, which are imaginatively to be taken to be the same thing—absurdity and nothingness, the absence of coherent definition. Frye gives a short list of natural images for each of his formal modes. The natural, automatic images for farce are the surface of the ocean (*Moby Dick*) and the snowfield (end of *Frankenstein*)—featureless expanses. Readily, one can add the color field and, at the extreme, Monochrome Painting, or Radical Painting, as it, rather appropriately in this context, came to be known.

Farce is also the preparation of the ground for re-emergence, something that ought to be kept in mind in considering the stage the art world entered next. Pop Art—and to some degree the attendant other movements of the time and still, but none quite to the degree of Pop Art—enacted the other aspect of farce: chaos. Pop Art is the equalizing of everything, the leveling of all priority, the reduction of all preference, and the extirpation of all honor. It opens the proposal—among its adherents as much as its opponents—after the austere subject matter of Abstract Expressionism, that anything might be the subject of art, that any attitude might be its attitude, and with Warhol's Brillo Boxes, indistinguishable from real ones, that anything might be considered a work of art. With no innate defining characteristics, with essentialism put aside, art could then promise no defining output: the aesthetic experience might also be anything at all. This is, of course, Duchamp stood on his head (who was pointing to an ultimately philosophical problem with the very idea of "art"). But order is priority, the pattern of prioritizing, and so Pop Art amounts in its

implications to the loss of order, the absence of any reason for one thing rather than another, in any context. It is the celebration of there being nothing to celebrate, giddiness in place of mindfulness, the party at the end of the world, the Satyricon, the happy riot, the smashing of the crockery (with Julian Schnabel, at a later stage, the matter finally become literal), the breaking of the toys, the ridicule of everything. It is the mockery that encompasses all, an impossibility of seriousness, of respect, of belief—a world gone mad. And it is what tragedy naturally leads to, following the breakdown of order as surely and sensibly as the Greek farce followed the tragic trilogy, as Aristophanes is the innate next step after Aeschylus.

And then comes the next step after that, as predictable in its eventual emergence as are its characteristics. Rebirth follows ridicule, the growth of new order, as organic as a flower, follows nothingness, and nothing is exhausted, as the Post-Modernists would have us worry. It just keeps turning over—eternally, it would seem, as we have been told elsewhere.

There are few artists who take this following step, who engage the necessary implication of what has preceded this moment, as clearly and forthrightly as Julie Hedrick, which makes her one of the more significant artists at this time—one of the few artists committed to what needs to be done next, to what follows the exhaustion of exhaustion, the nothingness at the end of the celebration of nothingness. She is one of the few contemporary artists looking to the return of moral will.

Hedrick's paintings are abstract works, glowing fields of tonal light spread across the canvas like atmospheres of mood-infused illumination. Renderings of pure incandescence, they are churning expanses of cloud-like patterns of dark and luster, quiet thunderheads of shadow and luminescence, silent ruminations brewing in a time before the separation of matter and void. In all of her mature works, light breaks from a dim background like an inspiration, building up in thicknesses of paint to, at the greatest density, a broken surface, a scumbling that is like mass emerging from pure energy. It is almost as if paint were fashioning itself out of light, formulating itself like volcanic rock, coagulating out of the magma that is the raw art of painting, as if the first work of painted art were a spontaneous eruption, creating itself before your eyes, creating itself out of a smoke-like luminosity, out of inherent principles of craft that will become a tradition and the skill of a master craftsman—as if thought were becoming form.

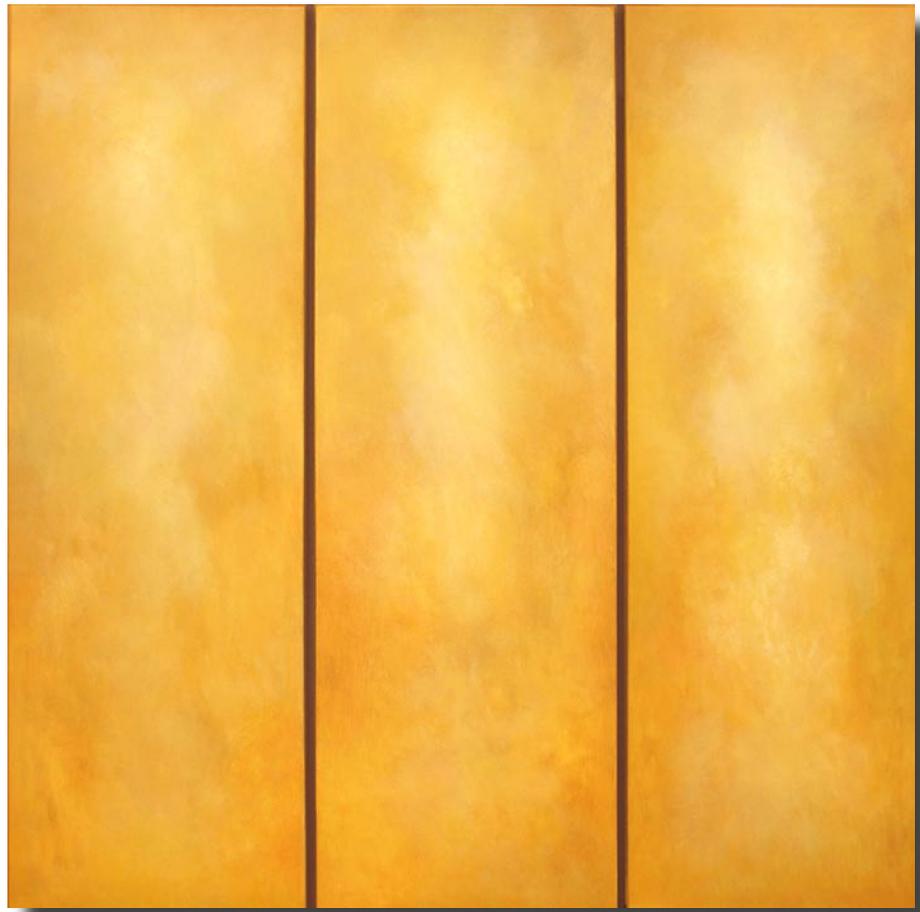
Technically, Hedrick's paintings are color field paintings, virtually monochrome paintings, which show and apply the re-emergence of the brush stroke in a tonal expanse. In a painting technique that the artist has said she obtained under the influence of Rembrandt, Artemisia Gentileschi, and the frescos of Pompeii, Hedrick works into the field inchoate formulations that come not of

intellectual exertions or symbolic organizations but the arsenal of painterly techniques. Her surfaces are catalogues of the gesticulations of brushwork, and even given her roster of influences, they appear to resemble no one so much as Monet in their gestural encyclopedia. The manner is a subspecies of the bravura style, and it ranges from the cauldron of strokes upon strokes to the caking up of beginning impastos, from the overt demonstration of deliberated strokes, laid like drawing lines, to the near burial of the

stroke with the gesture of the hand in evidence through the movement from dark to light. Without the foundation of subject matter, what one sees is the thought of paint—every moment drawn from the dictionary of painting, from the compendium of available gesture, in every moment, the authentic artist doing what the paint wants to do, just as the authentic writer draws more from the dictionary of language than from accomplished works that precede him and obeys the vector of the desire of the words.

There has always been the sense of something arising in Hedrick's works, but in this exhibition of nine paintings from 2007 and 2008, there is something more occurring, something new happening, and the title of the exhibition, "Awakening," is precisely right. In the press materials distributed by the gallery, Hedrick says that these paintings are a departure for her. Her previous works she characterizes as "interior and reflective." These are the result of "a meditation on nature."

Hedrick's attention has turned outward, from the inward focus of rumination to the reflection on the world, and one does not require her statement to recognize it. The indicators of it are difficult to isolate. But they are tangible presences, subtle suggestions of a change of orientation, felt implications like



Julie Hedrick, *Ochre, Rising Pale*, 2008
Oil on canvas, triptych, 61 x 61 in. 155 x 155 cm.



Julie Hedrick, *Blue Awakening*, 2007
Oil on canvas, 36 x 36 in. 91.4 x 91.4 cm.

tendrils of intimations stretching through the gallery room, lacing through the paintings, drawing one from each near realization to the next, like a finger running along the articulate veins of the nerves, along the network of a sensation that is also an intuition. You feel something whelming up, something different from what this artist has shown us before, something just breaking through like a shoot pressing the earth from below.

Perhaps the one overt matter here is the handling of color.

These works lean more towards the monochromatic than has been the case with Hedrick prior. The colors are more distributed among the individual works than across individual surfaces, as if the impression at hand has been allotted to the works in coordination, as if they were of a piece—as if they made a story.

And as one walks through the gallery space, the realization comes. The paintings add up, and one realizes what one is witnessing is a new Creation myth. Emergence has always been implicit in Hedrick's art, but the aligning of the colors, the ordering of the color compositions, has created a segmenting, a distribution and ordering, of the thought of her art. The paintings in "Awakening" are distributed almost entirely in three colors: those from yellow to white, those in blue, and those in green, with one painting—*Rose is Rose is Rose*, 2007—in the titular tone, the single exception. The three colors take emergence in three directions and acquire a symbolic valency, a sense of something specific rising up, coming into existence.

In the works of white to yellow, such as *Ochre, Rising Pale*, 2008, *Light Sequence*, 2007-8, and *Bright, Light, Bright*, 2008, the coagulation appears to be of pure light, illumination formulating of its own, as if there were nothing to

illuminate, as if before there were anything to illuminate, as if all there were to see were the characteristics of light generating itself out of mists of nothing: the shifts of densities, of shimmers, of half-created to manifested brilliancies. In two of the works—*Ochre, Rising Pale and Bright, Light, Bright*—the brightest areas are coalesced, unusual for Hedrick, into near forms: embryonic,

only partially present, they seem something like flames, rising up the center of each composition, revealing themselves dimly as light in the center of fields of light, or as pillars of fire. At the center of each composition, but not of each work, for all three works are organized as triptychs, as sets of three individual compositions. Hedrick says in the press materials that the multi-part works here (others are composed of more than three panels) are intended to be reminiscent of Renaissance altarpieces, and thereby is announced the intention of a sense of creation more specific and targeted than that of aesthetic creativity.

In the works of blue—*Blue Awakening*, 2007, *Dawn, Blue and Gray*, 2008, and *River, Breath*, 2007—the symbolic valency of the imagery is clearly sky. A created world is forming, a separation of heaven and earth, as well as the separation of the inner world and the outer, for another implication of the blue—one knows it purely out of impulse, for no reason one can cite, perhaps out of the vision of the concrete creation of immateriality, perhaps by the “logic” of the color itself—is thought itself. And the condensing center of *Blue Awakening* feels like light in the steaming formlessness lacing itself together with an awareness, like a ghost present in the void, like an eye opening—a forming world knowing its witness is there to observe it: looking back.

In the works of green—*Ode to Temair*, 2007-8, and *Green, Rising, Green*, 2007-8—the symbolic implication is as inevitable as it is in the blue works. It is life, vegetation, the creation of the living presence in the world. And one obviously may include *Rose is Rose is Rose* in this. And the entire exhibition itself—the story it makes—becomes a triptych. And “Temair” is Gaeilge (the native language of the Irish) for the Hill of Tara in Ireland, the mythical dwelling



Julie Hedrick, *Ode to Temair*, 2007-8
Oil on canvas, 48 x 72 in. 122 x 183 cm.

place of the gods and the entrance to the otherworld. And the implication—the story—is complete.

And the next turn in the larger story is clear. This exhibition is the myth of spring returning, of the world re-arising, of new life forming itself out of the wreckage of the old. It is Genesis, come again.

That is its story. Its nature is the aesthetic conviction, the aesthetic mission, of Julie Hedrick in all her work: the re-emergence of art, art returning to the creation and conveyance of a world of its own, as large and extensive, as varied and rich, as the world we discover around us—art as the observed world transformed, as the vehicle of the fusion of the inner and the outer. Art as honor, not the spite of ridicule, and thus as much the expression and impulse of self-respect as of respect and serious regard for the world we encounter, for the life around us. Art as the opposite of mockery, and smug self-satisfaction. Or, more simply, art as life. And Hedrick rediscovers it, here as in all her work, precisely where T. S. Eliot wrote it would be found and always will be harbored: along the surface glittering “out of heart of light.”

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