



Hands (2/16/24)

A figure-- either emerging from or disintegrating into the surrounding cloud of floating fragments-- stands with its hands folded across its chest-- lightly-- as if poised between a gesture of self-enclosure and reaching out. Another emerging or disintegrating figure places its hands on the first figure's chest from behind, again lightly, somewhat as a parent might do with a small child, giving them a sense of security, of being held, but also facing them towards the world (but here there is no world, save what the two together with storm of fragments make). As philosopher C. S. Peirce put it, "the movement of love is circular, at one and the same impulse projecting creations into independency and drawing them into harmony." Peirce identified love, in this sense, as a universal principle driving the emergence and evolution of systems and entities and the complex ecologies in which they shape and are shaped by their relationships with each other.

The immediate reason the hands are ambiguously poised is simple: as I drew them, I wasn't thinking of grasping or letting go or reaching out. If I had been thinking of grasping-- if I had

been *imaginatively inhabiting the feeling of grasping*-- they would have looked like they were grasping. This is just as, when I'm drawing a face, I don't think of how men's and women's faces differ and what features need to be manipulated in what ways to make the face look masculine or feminine. I couldn't even begin to give a coherent account of how to do this, and why would I be able to, given the variability and complexity of gender presentations? When I want to draw a woman's face I just conjure a woman and when I want to draw a man's face I conjure a man-- not even visually, but as a kind of presence-- and the face ends up looking more like one or the other-- and when I'm not thinking of gender, it ends up looking more or less androgynous.

(Q) When a figure is standing on the ground-- as opposed to lying down or floating in weightlessness-- which muscles and bits of flesh are taut and which are slack? (A) The first thing I think of here is how the flesh of the lower thigh impinges on the kneecap from above, but offhand, I can't say what other details I manipulate when a figure is standing. This is why my figures tend to hover somewhere between earthbound and weightless. It's not like I craved earthly realism but lacked the discipline to learn how to simulate it-- okay, well, it's kind of like that, but I wanted other things more. I've never been interested in bodies in real space but in how bodies create their own space-- their own relational fields-- so ultimately this is why they hover somewhere between earthbound and weightless-- as they hover between assorted categories of abstraction and representation. In groping around to find a way of saying this, I realize that the ambiguity of earthliness and weightlessness is more or less *the story of my life*. When I was younger, on days I was feeling especially otherworldly-- or just hadn't gotten enough sleep-- I used to wear heavy boots as if to keep myself from floating away. Or as Blake put it,

my abstract folly hurries me often away while I am at work, carrying me over Mountains & Valleys which are not Real in a Land of Abstraction where spectres of the Dead wander. This I endeavor to prevent & with my whole might chain my feet to the world of Duty & Reality. but in vain! the faster I bind the better is the Ballast for I so far from being bound down take the world with me in my flights & often it seems to me lighter than a ball of wool rolled by the wind [.]

As you might guess, Blake's self-effacement goes toward showing why he can't be expected to keep his nose to the grindstone of mundane work: in this letter as in several others, he's explaining to one of his patrons why he hasn't gotten an illustration job done. When I teach Romanticism, I sometimes offer students who don't like any of the suggested essay topics the option of writing me a Blakean letter about how they're too artistic and otherworldly to be bent to the yoke of some professorial assignment. The chance to wriggle out of something you don't want to do can be a powerful incentive, so many of these have been brilliant-- and besides, to write such a thing, you have to have developed a strong intuitive understanding of Blake and the ambivalent relationships of artists to patrons and to the marketplace.

ASIDE: Kinds of Realism. In Michaelangelo's Moses, the patriarch's right hand pulls on his long beard and the little finger is slightly raised. You may notice on the forearm that the muscle that controls the little finger-- the *extensor digiti minimi*-- is conspicuously taut. This is, for a start, a testament to the sculptor's

mastery of anatomy-- but it's not such an obscure phenomenon: when I look at the back of my forearm as I raise and lower my little finger, I can see it. The main thing to think about here is why Michaelangelo cared about this enough to observe it so carefully and get it so right, even to accentuate it. As I understand it, Michaelangelo's realism is not an end in itself but goes to the service of the body as a system-- a divinely, dynamically, and dialectically tuned balance of torques and tensions-- or if you prefer a more mundane version, a complex set of connections like those that enable an adept physical therapist to prescribe shoulder exercises that correct a pain in your lower back. One of the reasons you can tell this is not simple realism is that the same dynamism was definitive for Michaelangelo even when he worked as a landscape architect: rather than flattening and remaking the somewhat random features of the Piazza del Campidoglio at the top of Rome's Capitoline Hill, Michaelangelo worked *with* them in a way that makes visible the process of geometrical order wrestling disorder into submission; this is why you could call his design *muscular*. He came by it honestly. The Moses and the Piazza del Campidoglio are living incarnations of how Michaelangelo lived the dynamism and the struggle to sustain balance amid turbulent countervailing forces in his internal life and his social and artistic life. If you're tuned to that wavelength, they will speak to you.



I always wince when I hear paleolithic figurines described as crude representations of the human body-- as if the people who made them were striving for and ignominiously failing to achieve 19th-century realism. They can't even be called artists-- shamans maybe-- and the figurines were certainly not art, if art is limited to the realm of aesthetic experience. Especially if the making of such magical figurines and other symbols and symbol systems (such as language) were a big part of what made us human, then these figures were evidently endowed with prodigious power and agency.

I've always admired Magritte as a painter because the somewhat wooden, workmanlike and simplified figures in his paintings are exactly as realistic as they need to be for the kind of conceptual magic he's interested in performing-- often some form of *defamiliarization* via a short, sharp visual shock. The melodramatic realism of Michaelangelo or the talismanic radiance of the paleolithic figurines would have been entirely at odds with what Magritte was up to.

But I want (1) talismanic radiance *and* (2) melodramatic realism *and* (3) conceptual magic-- or rather, I experience all these in the drawing. Instead of saying that, by wanting them all, I try and fall short of fully achieving any of them-- which you could truthfully say if the drawings don't speak to you-- my

account is that in my drawings you will typically find *an ecology of fragments and hybrids and ambiguous relatives of each of these three, which can and frequently do morph into the others--* and again, as I write the words, I realize that this is simply *what my life and my world is like*. As far as I'm concerned, the choreography of fragments of conceptual magic, the talismanic, and the realistic *is realism*. If the drawings do speak to you, it must be because you recognize this at some level as your world as well, or according to Kant's "categorical imperative," as *the world*.

Many of the forms and figures and networks with which this drawing began-- even as they were being eroded and disintegrating-- continued pursuing their wild aspiration to become three-dimensional life-forms. Some of them got most of the way there before being pulled apart by the undertow, others were happy all along in their own abstract shapeliness-- the exuberant curves and squiggles. Most of them all ended up in a primordial state somewhere between being whole creatures, organic fragments, glyphs, and runes. All of these qualify as *pluripotent* because they retained the capacity to morph into one or more of the others. This primordial and pluripotent state is a strange attractor for my drawings. It qualifies as a *strange* attractor because, as I've suggested above, it's a shifty and heterogeneous state: a flat bit of ribbon becomes a pregnant seahorse; a bulging deltoid becomes a convoluted zigzag, a crevasse of negative space becomes a series of petroglyphic lizards and a jumping jack with a whip-like tail-- and each of these, if left to their own devices, might still become one or more of the others. Of course it's weird to say *they ended up in a primordial state* because primordiality and pluripotency are supposed to come *before* everything else. (Q) If these are considered *initial* states, how can they be where things *end up*? (A) The answer is that *system time, organism time*, is not linear; systems manufacture their own components-- for example, as bodies manufacture cells. (Q) But how can they make their components when they need their components to exist in the first place? (A) The answer is that system time, organism time, is not linear because (1) systems and their components co-evolve and remain engaged in the process of making and remaking each other-- in other words, the process is, above all, *open*; (2) evolution and devolution are sometimes simultaneous; (3) as one system is becoming more intricate, another can be cannibalizing it for spare parts (as in the relationship between humans and capitalism); and (4) on the long thermodynamic slide of dissipation down to a sunless sea (a.k.a. the arrow of time) whole worlds keep getting swallowed and wriggling back up out of the turbulent temporal eddies and crosscurrents.

You can make this interwoven intimacy of linearity and nonlinearity as mystical or mundane as you like. (Q) Do you think this sentence was written one word after another, or did I go back and add and subtract words and clauses as I composed it, maybe weeks after I first sketched it out, or on the other hand, did it begin as a montage of fragments that I managed to wrestle into linearity? (Q) Is this linear and nonlinear stitching together of writing and rewriting-- which we might just call *thinking*-- magical or mundane? (Q) When you read this sentence, do you understand it one word after another like a forward-moving train on a track, or is your brain always looking backward as you come to terms with how what was already said is changed by what follows it, and always looking forward to how the suspense of unfinished syntax will be resolved? Is the nonlinear meaning-making of linear sentences mystical or mundane? (A) The obvious answer is *yes and no*.

In this drawing I can see two of the little sprites that sometimes show up in my drawings, one with a tail and the other a kind of human wisp, both dancing with arms raised in a whimsical and celebratory way, something like Blake's angels "sang together and shouted for joy" in the creation scene from his illustrations for the book of Job. I was happy when these two showed up.



My vocabulary of shapes, though mostly recognizable by assorted family resemblances, changes with the visual context of the drawing, my mood, the mood of my hand, the state of my nervous system, and what have you. In this drawing, I can see now (weeks after the fact) that the presence of the two sets of hands seemed to pull everything else into their orbit through subtle resonances. Just as pluripotent cells can become brain cells when they are in the brain or skin cells when they're in the skin, many of the other fragments here came to resemble the hands as the hands came to be the last remaining fully representational images.

Even the little flakes are not quite as square or round as they are in most of my drawings. Here they tend more to the rhomboid and amoeboid, as if even these smallest particles or pixels were still bulging and twisting with ambition to become living things. As if they too were being beckoned by the hands. And only now the word *beckoned* makes me realize what the hands are doing and the more specific reason they can't be described as grasping, letting go, or reaching out. They're *conjuring*.