



### Void Being (2/16/24)

I called these drawings *Void Being 1, 2, and 3*; the first is in the middle. They didn't start off as a triptych, but I realized that they could all be part of the same thing and they were game to participate.

In your work and maybe your life, you're likely to be working with the same sets of obsessive problems or processes-- and besides, (Q) in a planetary ecology like ours, or in all nesting systems-within-systems (solar systems, galaxies, universes), isn't everything always part of the same thing? (A) *Yes and no*; this is what I call *the shimmering of singularity and plurality*. The drawings are different-- and the same-- and both of these in variously subtle, blatant, and thoroughgoing ways. I hope you can see this; the drawing is all about making it experienceable.

A long time ago, someone told me-- maybe an art teacher in college or a gallery owner looking at my work-- that my drawings were too different from each other, that I hadn't developed a signature style. They made it clear that this was a lack glaring enough to disqualify me as an artist. My works did not amount to what is called in the business an *oeuvre* (a body of work), whether because I was a dilettante or just immature. Because I'm what used to be called an *inner-directed* person, this rejection-- which, as far as I was concerned, amounted to a kind of existential negation-- was both something I took to heart and completely shrugged off. A marker of this contradiction is that I remember the substance of it but can't recall when or where or who. It went beyond *guilt*-- which is about failing to do something that you could have and should have done-- to *shame*, which is about failing to be something that you could not possibly be. It's good to get beyond guilt to shame because it means you're learning something about who you are and your limitations. Shame is usually a necessary step on the way to shamelessness, or in the current idiom, *no more fucks to give*. As Blake said, "if the fool would persist in his folly, he would become wise."

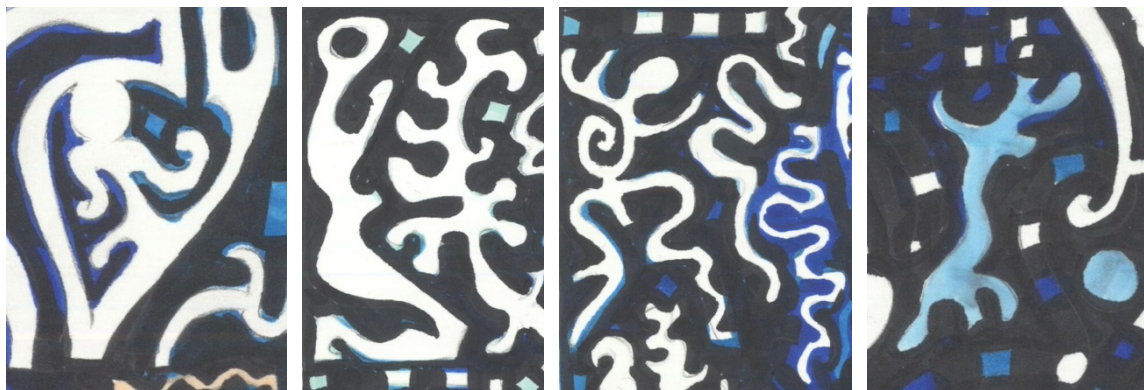
I'd like to think it's because I persisted in my folly that both my writing and drawing have, since then, come to orbit the same set of obsessive themes and processes. You could succinctly

describe the most common features of the drawings-- for example, orchestrated fragments and crisply delineated shapes that come to occupy the cusp of figurative and abstract. Is this what it means to have a signature style? Is this why, if you were feeling glib, you could describe Cezanne's mature style as *impressionism inhabited by a subtle cubism and obsessed with the mystical solidity of the world and of the painted surface*? From there, you could say *when you've seen one, you've seen them all--* or alternately, *it's such a good trick that I never get tired of it*. When it comes to Cezanne, I never do. If you're tired of the mystical solidity of the world, the problem isn't with Cezanne. Better check your meds.

So what happened, over the years? Did I finally come into my own, or sink into self-caricature, or is there much of a difference? Having taken the existential negation to heart, I imagine that the same art teacher or gallery owner would now say that my work was *too similar*.

Some light can be shed on the bigger question of what happened to the unity or disunity of my style by looking at what happened more specifically with the *Void Being* drawings. It's embarrassingly simple. I got tired of the field of evenly distributed forms that emerged from the process of fragmentation. Like many of my drawings, these started with more connected networks of forms, including a few more figurative forms, which then began to break up and become more abstract, but in the process of disintegration, a new complex order emerged (via the concurrent process of re-integration, sometimes known as *structural entanglement*) in the form of the orchestrated field of forms. *Things fall apart and fall together at the same time*. That's my process-- and thermodynamics and systems theory-- in a nutshell. I hope you can see this, again because making this experienceable is what the drawings are about.

You sustain the process until you get to a point that satisfies you. This is what Wallace Stevens called "The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice." The process can be convulsive. As some painter once said, to make a great painting you have to be willing to ruin a good painting. As in many of my drawings, the darkness that delineated the forms began to erode them and break them up, but other forms emerged here and there from the break-up, including some that are visible as small entities.



Then the darkness got more unruly, opening up a void that began to become a form of its own. The Void Being emerged at the center, one arm raised and the other lowered as they extend diagonally from his torso and, in the drawings on either side, get lost in the storm of forms and fragments all around them.

Later it occurred to me that the Void Being resembles the river, surrounded by teeming figures, that runs through heaven, earth, and hell in Hieronymus Bosch's famous triptych, which I have come to understand as enacting the paradoxical unity and difference among heaven, earth, and hell. It's not that I got the paradox from Bosch-- I got it from Blake and from my own life-- but after years of idolizing Bosch-- since I was a child-- the way he embodied the paradox in the *Garden of Earthly Delights*-- the way he *landscaped* it-- had been impressed so thoroughly in my subconscious mind that I spontaneously reproduced it. It was only after the fact that I realized I'd done this-- or even just came to think that I'd done it.



The Void Being is the one that simultaneously holds heaven, earth, and hell together and pushes them apart-- or if you're feeling the macho poignance of it all, Samson standing between the pillars, bringing the whole edifice down onto his own head. I'm not in that mood at the moment, though when I was making the drawings, I was feeling some of the melodrama of that.

Now what I see is a child making a snow angel. See all the snowflakes? And the angel?

Joy. With a tinge of heroic macho failure.