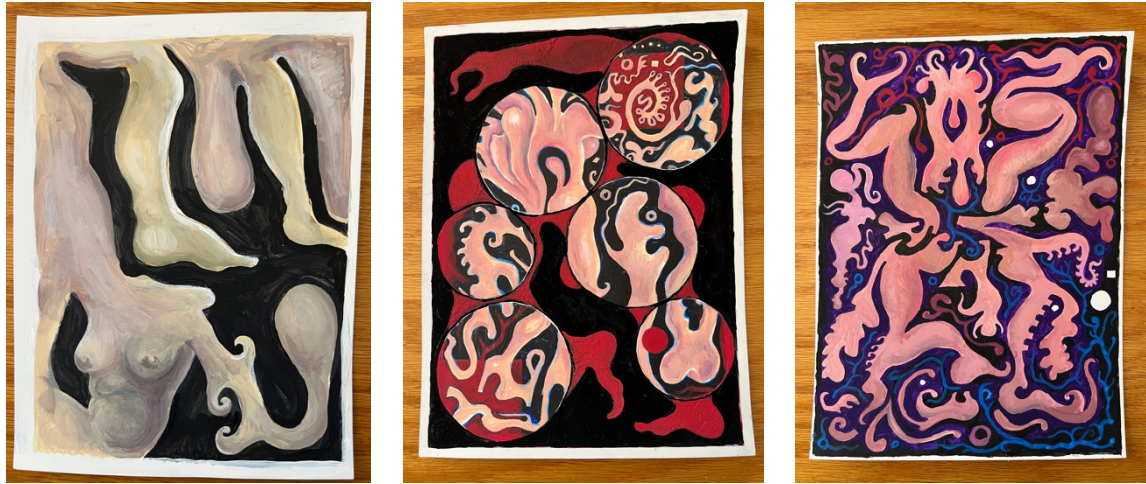


“... my pictures were conceived as material signs of freedom of thought” --Rene Magritte

## 1. Flesh Tones Problem



After days of wracking my eyes and trying various combinations of colors and failing to achieve the right flesh tones and shadows (I'm not used to working with this level of realism), I felt my world beginning to crumble. Admittedly, I was also dealing with assorted more or less intractable problems with relationships, health, and money—not to mention the sorry state of the world, with its rampant capitalist exploitation, genocidal warfare, collapsing democracies, ecological disaster—but for the moment, the flesh-tones-and-shadows problem displaced all of these.

You can say art is a way of taking your mind off serious and often intractable problems in favor of trivial and tractable ones (a.k.a. *whistling through a graveyard*): if not simple escapism, then a control fantasy. But, just for a start, I don't think the flesh-tones-and-shadows problem is tractable, either.

I'm sure I could have found plenty of self-help videos on How to Paint Flesh Tones, or I could have called my old painter friend. In similar situations I've done both, but this time I needed to grope along on my own. I examined my own flesh, but the results were inconclusive. I did notice that the shadows were neutral, by which I mean that all the flesh looks like it's a uniform color, even though where it's lit and where it's in shadow *aren't* the same color. The uniformity is not a visual phenomenon: it's something the brain whispers to the eye.

During my morning meditation, what should have been the obvious answer all along came to me out of the blue: I should look at how other painters worked this out. I thought of painters I admire who deploy their own workmanlike kinds of realism without striving for optical verisimilitude: my old faves Bosch and Magritte, and Kerry James Marshall, with his revolutionary and unphotographable Black skin tones.

It's mostly a matter of *dynamic range* (the ratios of the darkness of the darks and lightness of the lights) rather than color as such. You could approximate Bosch by underpainting in *grisaille*

(monochromatic shades of grey) and then putting shades of peachy cream over it-- or whatever color you like, such as demonic green or blue, as Bosch sometimes does; this reproduces the neutrality of the shadows. Touch up with more shading and highlights, maybe add some redder tinges in hands, feet, lips and genitalia-- and you're done. This doesn't produce an especially realistic image, since worldly shadows sensitively reflect the particulars of the lighting (including what it reflects of the dominant colors in the environment), but Bosch doesn't care much about this. I never did, either: I remember an art professor going on about the blue tone in a particular shadow, and I squinted and tried to see it but then it seemed to be buzzing with subtle, candy-colored iridescence. I wasn't on drugs, and I'm not color-blind— I just wasn't born a realist. Bosch, not being a connoisseur of shadow colors, makes skin tones and shadows bluish in a formulaic way when he's painting night scenes, and he lets his usual peachy cream get darker or lighter or browner or whiter (often women are depicted as whiter, for example) to reflect the variety of skin tones even among white people-- if for no other reason than uniformity would be jarringly unrealistic.



The dynamic range of human vision is immense and exquisitely calibrated: on a moonless night, we can make out objects by starlight alone even though they are receiving *one billionth* of the illumination of a sunny day. Black people in Kerry James Marshall paintings tend to look like black holes to the camera-- but cameras don't *want* anything; they don't particularly *love people*. For us, humans are not simply visual objects like any other. We crave the details of faces and hands; Marshall's darker dynamic range pulls us closer; the effect is *intimacy*.

These meditations absolved me of my Realistic Flesh Tones problem. I love the unrealistic peachy cream of Bosch's storybook white people, the unrealistic blackness of Marshall's Black people, the formulaic and unrealistic bluishness of Bosch's night people (*funny, they don't look bluish*), the wooden and bichromatic only-as-real-as-they-need-to-be quality of Magritte's people (or call it the "real"-in-quotation-marks quality). And by the way, Magritte often thematizes the Flesh Color Problem, effectively making the case for the realism *and the unrealism* of any color choices by rendering his figures in a dark and a light shade of some unrealistic color (in which case, if you're so unrealistically committed to realism, you could imagine that a blue figure was

just a peachy one being bathed in blue light), or by such ploys as depicting a rainbow-colored nude.



Thanks Hieronymous, Rene, and Kerry, for the timely tips, and above all, for the *permission*.

In all of this, half of me marvels at how adept I am at working with my own constraints. If we could seamlessly realize our desires, how weary and flat the world would be! Thank God we are compelled to fly by the seats of our pants.

But half of me despairs, with the few years left to me on the planet, at how much farther the achievement of anything that would satisfy me as a painter continues to recede, how I've squandered my time, how I will die without ever having even glimpsed the promised land of painting where the painters in my pantheon live. Another half of me—fortunately I'm not restricted to two halves-- knows that I fall so far short of realizing what I imagine that what I end up painting is not even *a pathetic failure at something* but *the achievement of something else altogether*. I was talking with my painter friend (Dave Sandberg) and he said the dialectical movement of those feelings made it sound like a sonnet, so I tried to write it:

I exult in how adept I've always been  
At playing with ubiquitous constraints  
And handicaps that shape my crooked paths  
And creativity in words and paints.  
But also I despair of even getting close  
To what I've dreamed of doing-- art is long  
and life is short. I've wasted so much time.  
The dreams seem only laughable and wrong.  
In truth I fall so short of Bosch or Blake  
You'd never even guess what I had dreamed.  
Not close enough to even count as failure!  
Maybe, then, success at *something else*,  
Like scruffy white kids, failing to be clones

Of Howlin Wolf, became the Rolling Stones?

## 2. System

I've been painting in acrylic for the last six months or so, mostly on plywood panels. Seems like the more I paint, the less I have to say. Maybe I'm finally becoming a laconic painter type. Maybe this is what comes of thinking beyond words, continuously as one is painting, day in and day out, following pathways that open up, continuously, beyond words. It reminds me that the one time I tried surfing and got beat up by the waves for hours, I realized why surfers talk the way they do. Maybe some version of that applies to painting.

I read that Leonard Cohen once read out a poem during an interview, and when the interviewer asked him what the poem meant, he paused for a moment and then read out the poem again. This must also gladden the heart of every painter.

People ask me what I did today and I say, *painted*. I don't know what to say next. Actually it may have been a wild ride. I may have felt more than once that I had ruined the painting, or that it was worthless, that I was worthless, or that I had broken through to a magical place where every gradation is overflowing with meaning, or that I was being thrown around by assorted existential ambivalences, or by dramatic technical failures and discoveries (often interwoven) that, if described in words, even another painter would find boring.

If you knew how to look, I was going to say, you could see all that in the painting. But that's not quite right. If you *wanted something* from the painting-- if you were open to the idea that it could deliver something to you, that it could resonate with some sublimity in you, then even without knowing how to look (it was never a matter of knowledge), the painting would meet you halfway, take you by the hand and walk with you in that place.



These days I've been painting figures, humans mostly, sprawling into the grotesque. I don't mean to suggest that they start out as human and then begin to warp and get abstracted and rearticulated and surreal and monstrous. It's more like they start off as all those things, or as something else-- call it just *a system of abstract forces or possibilities*—and in their dynamical writhings they manifest intermittently as human, and the field where this all plays out is what interests me. This, by the way, is how I can claim that my paintings are like the universe as I understand it (*a field of dynamical writhings that manifest intermittently as human*)—so that, if I were so inclined (I'm not), I could call it *realism*. There was no tendency or teleology or eschatology or scatology to incarnate as human, nor (on the other hand) for the human to revert convulsively but relentlessly via some kind of death drive to something more bestial, primordial, inorganic, or static. Instead, this restlessly creative and destructive state might as well be *the resting state of things*. Primordality continues.

Read Blake's *First Book of Urizen*; it's all there! Embodiment and creation itself seem to keep happening over and over, as if the Book of Genesis, even though it uses the phrase *in the beginning*, kept on beginning over and over, and always in the middle of the story. In case you hadn't heard, there's a backstory, a prequel; creation wasn't the first thing that happened. Keep paying particular attention to Blake's melodramatic verbs, especially the participles, all modalities of *becoming*.

rolling...swelling...condensing...unclasping...sund'ring...dark'ning...  
thund'ring...roaring...combining...burning...struggling...beating...wrenching...  
hurtling...surging...raging...stretching...dividing...panting...conglobing...  
trembling...

The animistic/pantheistic vitality of Blake's visions is such that everything in the universe is alive, all that lives is holy and not only alive but *human*. In order to understand this, you have to get beyond humanism in its dominant form, which involves the binary distinction between the human and everything else. This human exceptionalism is almost always accompanied by hierarchies, especially distinctions between those claimed as the real humans and the lesser ones, who aren't quite human at all. Humanism was always an exclusive club. This is why understanding *everything* as human, as Blake tended to do, is thus one form of radical opposition to humanism! It opens up the human; it levels the playing field. I often paint this universalized humanness, which is, thank God, riven by radical difference and otherness.

Before it's people or monsters or abstract shapes, what I'm painting is *a system*. You can see this, at least subliminally, without explanation, but I'll mention a few telltale signs-- though it is a bit plodding to describe them.

First, the images stop before they get to the edge of the panel, like fish swimming in an aquarium. If the painting were like a window onto a sprawling world (realism usually pretends to be a window), things would be cut off at the edges, as if they continued beyond the frame, as worlds outside of windows do. But here you see the whole thing, complete unto itself, even if (as systems do) it also necessarily belongs to a world with which it is in constant conversation.

Second, it is in the process of self-organization; this is also something you can see. Herds and schools and swarms of animals—and even plants as they distribute themselves in a landscape--self-organize according to a simple algorithm: the mandate to stay close but not too close to one's fellow creatures. When you look into a cloud of migrating monarch butterflies,



you see how dynamically they maintain an even distance from each other, even if you don't consciously register it. In my painting, you also notice that some figural forms are

disintegrating, but that the pieces are not only self-organizing (in the same space-filling way that butterflies and plants do) but also entifying: the fragments are in the process of becoming little figures or creatures themselves—each of which, again, tend to stay close without impinging on their fellow entities.

Third, the form and content interact on a level playing field. This is clear because the images don't just stop before getting to the edge of the painting (the frame), but the relatively uniform spaces between objects is *the same* as the relatively uniform space between the objects and the frame. Visually, this might be a trivial thing: it imparts a subtle feeling of balance, but it also means that the depiction of the object is a participant in the object, the system in question—or to put it another way, the observer is part of the system.

### 3. The Grotesque



You can look up *grotesque* and discover various features associated with it, such as the themes of *hybridity* and *metamorphosis*, low and impure or mixed forms (such as tragi-comedy) and a generally anti-bourgeois stance. In its original and narrowest sense, the grotesque is characterized (as per Wikipedia) by ornamental arrangements of arabesques with interlaced garlands and small and fantastic human and animal figures.

Without any attempt on my part to conform to these features and definitions—and before I even had any idea there was such a category-- these features have always characterized my drawings and paintings-- ever since I was a child: their content, their form, the process by which they come into being, and even the shape of individual lines.

*Grotesque* is an aesthetic category, like the terms *picturesque*, *beautiful*, and *sublime*. These come mostly from ancient terms but were codified in the eighteenth and nineteenth century along with the overarching category of *the aesthetic*. They are modalities, often but not necessarily visual, of portraying and experiencing the world, like the more narrative forms of tragedy and comedy. Each has certain characteristics but can't be reduced to a list of features (in any case, every instance doesn't necessarily have every feature). Each category may also frame or anchor a worldview, an emotional or cognitive style. Each may constitute a claim that the fundamental nature of things is this way—or just, in this case, that *life* is grotesque (an ontological claim), or more circumspectly, that the most we can say is that it is a particular style of seeing or knowing or representing things, of organizing experience (an epistemological claim), or most narrowly, that all these are styles and an artist may simply choose one or another for a given artwork.

I'm inclined to make the big ontological claim. Of course, it would be naïve or narcissistic to think the world would obligingly fit into some little box you had prepared, even if it tends to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Tragic types and satirical types might die together in a plane crash, even if the former might be sobbing and the latter rolling their eyes. But this is not just to say “each to his own taste,” since the image itself is one only a grotesque type would have come up with! If it strikes you as apropos—and not just in bad taste-- then you may be one of those people, like me, inclined to give the grotesque the last word. And speaking of last words, while I am well aware of the sublimity and tragedy of death from my own losses of loved ones, I learned once in a car accident that my last word is likely to be a grotesque epithet.

It seems to me there is something fundamentally grotesque about being a living thing-- about the precarious unsustainability of maintaining a far-from-equilibrium state, always changing, evolving and falling apart, often simultaneously and convulsively, and at the same time, remaining the same, for better and worse-- and especially something grotesque about physicality, about embodiment, not just the messiness of it, the constant ingesting and excreting of things, the messiness of needing other also messy people and sprawling, messy ecologies-- but something grotesque even about the lines and surfaces and depths of living things, the smoothnesses and fractal roughnesses, the swellings and protuberances, the erections and flaccidities, the pores, the hairs, the dark folds of orifices and the slippery transitions between outside and inside. Depending on the inflection, you might spin these as disgusting or sublime, but there is no beauty or sex or sublimity or physicality itself without them.

On one hand, then, the grotesque is distinguished from the sublime and beautiful; on the other, it is a necessary component of the sublime and beautiful *and vice versa*. The sublime without the grotesque is merely beautiful; the beautiful without the grotesque is merely picturesque. This is not such a logic-defying contradiction since things are always bound up with the things from which they are distinguished, but the necessary co-presence of these categories—or at least the recognition and depiction of it—is itself generally called *grotesque*. This could be the basis of a

claim for the precedence or even superiority of the grotesque, but I'll leave that in the conditional since I've already made one irresponsible ontological claim.

#### 4. Figures

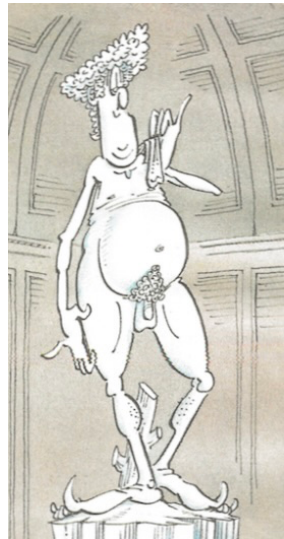
The majority of figures in my paintings are imagined in the act of drawing and painting rather than drawn from life or from some fully pre-imagined figure. Sometimes I will use a figure from one of my old drawings, whether imagined or drawn from a model, and occasionally a figure from somebody else's painting, or a photo, or whatnot.

Blake learned to draw by copying various sculptures and paintings, almost always by copying copies of original sculptures and paintings in the form of plaster casts and engravings. This was necessarily the case since he never left England, but furthermore, it was the common way of learning to draw in late eighteenth century Europe, before drawing from life began to displace it. Based on the small selection of his early drawings still extant, it seems that the tomb sculptures at Westminster Abbey he drew as an apprentice engraver were among the few original sculptures he worked from. The so-called Greek foot that appears on most of his figures-- in which the second toe is slightly longer than the big toe-- he seems to have gotten from plaster casts and engravings of Michaelangelo, one of his longstanding exemplars. (The detail below shows Blake's depiction of God's feet and Satan's feet, surrounded by angels' feet.) Because the caricature of visionary artists as drawing the content of their visions (and even the language in which they are rendered) directly from their pipeline to a higher reality, it may be surprising to find Blake asserting that "to learn the Language of Art, Copy for Ever is My Rule" (636).



My own imagined-in-the-act-of-being-drawn figures draw on a mish-mash of sources in addition to life drawing. I was always struck by the elegance of the Greek foot, probably because my own stubby-toed peasant-like feet are anything but Grecian, so it amuses me to use the Greek foot I picked up from Blake and Michaelangelo. Another major early influence was *Mad Magazine* cartoonist Don Martin, famous for his characters' folded-toe feet, sometimes curled up like a jester's shoe. Martin's cartoons play with the grotesqueness of the human body understood as an elastic apparatus constantly subject to various internal and external forces that stretch it, compact it, and buffet it about-- as when toes flap back and forward in the ordinary act of galumphing down the street, a pinky finger sproings up when the others grasp a teacup, eyes roll and tongues flutter sideways when a head reverberates upon being thwacked by a brick,

organs spontaneously leap out of bodies on the operating table, or a body flattened by a steamroller is folded into a paper airplane and sent flying to the hospital.



I'm proud—as a partisan of the grotesque would be-- of having Don Martin and Michaelangelo among my primary early influences. But Martin's grotesque cartoons and caricatures (see his version of Michaelangelo's *David* above, next to a foot of the *David*) bear a deep and surprising resemblance to Michaelangelo's beautiful and sublime figures in that 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. Again, this resemblance could only be noticed by someone attuned to the grotesque.

Human limbs have evolved to curl, not just to bend as straight things do when hinged. For example, the hand is about two-thirds the length of the forearm, which is two-thirds the length of the upper arm—and these diminishing proportions continue all the way to the fingertips: the distal phalanx (fingertip segment) is about two thirds the length of the middle phalanx, which is two-thirds of the proximal phalanx, which is two-thirds of the metacarpals (the hand bones between the fingers and wrist). The diminishing length of each segment means that the entire arm tends to curl almost as a logarithmic spiral from the shoulder to the fingertips. The ratios of the leg-- of thigh to shin to foot to toes-- are less elegant but similarly diminishing.



Spirality is a universal structural tendency and growth pattern-- from ammonites to butterfly tongues, chameleon tails, DNA, elephant trunks, fiddlehead ferns, and galaxies (and that's just the first seven letters of the alphabet). You can make this as mystical or mathematical as you like—or as mechanical: a strip or a strand or a sheet tends to curl because the forces that act on its front and back, its root and tip, or one of its sides and the other are rarely even—and we share this dynamism and asymmetry. A wet sheet of paper will tend to curl because the top will dry and contract faster than the bottom; a person will curl up into the fetal position (with arms curled around legs) because this is the way articulated things with a back and a front contract.

The tendency to curl is built into things. Among complex and living things it reenacts the quantum and atomic symmetry-breaking events thought to be at the origin of complex order in the first place.

Of course, curving and spiraling are not the only thing that the components or fragments in my paintings do (or the only way real things elaborate, change, and grow), but the basic permutation lexicon is surprisingly small: they bifurcate, duplicate, multiply, mirror, swell, constrict, flatten, hollow out, attach, detach, taper, break off, undulate, zigzag, fractalize, darken or lighten, vary in color. Such a list cannot be definitive; it is too short (there are myriad omissions) and too long (terms overlap or are subcategories of other terms, such as *bifurcate*, *duplicate*, *multiply*, *mirror*). To include so-called “higher” level permutations, the list would have to burgeon and sprawl indefinitely: grow appendages, biomorphize, anthropomorphize, mechanize, cartoonify, graphematize, flame, gesticulate, emote, strut, blush, exult, sag, stand on tippy-toe, burgeon, sprawl, and so on. A little shape might *swell* (one of the basic permutations) but the increase in size might be an incidental side effect of some higher process of *biomorphosis* or some even higher process of *putting on airs*. Because complexity is, at bottom, absolute and only divisible into greater and lesser depending on your relationship with it (this is a long and ultimately mathematical story I won't go into here), the division into “lower” and “higher” levels is always relative.

Classical Roman philosopher/poet Lucretius presciently described the beginning of complexity in the universe as a symmetry-breaking event: as they fall through the void like rain, the original atoms begin spontaneously to swerve-- the beginning of what sometimes becomes a more developed curve or spiral. Without this swerve, Lucretius writes, “nature would never have produced anything”: it embodies the “free will which living things throughout the world have.”



The curling arabesques so prominent in my drawings and paintings do not *illustrate* this. I was drawing them long before I knew anything about symmetry-breaking or Lucretius or cloud chambers or Fibonacci. What they do is bear certain primordial family resemblances with fellow components of a grotesque universe. Naturally.



Brooklyn, 2/2025

