

SPIRITUAL METHODS IN EARLY ABSTRACT ART AND  
CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS

by

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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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This thesis explores the link between theosophy, a spiritual philosophy derived from Hinduism popular at the turn of the twentieth century, and the birth of abstract art. Theosophy is well documented to have been an interest of many of the most famous early abstract artists, and the ideas presented by theosophy is clearly represented in these artists' work and writing.

Theosophy has a special emphasis on unseen forces in the universe, and of the action of the human soul. These emphases have also been applied by a number of theosophical writers to the observation of the physical action of the soul, and to explaining artistic values in terms of theosophy. Contemporary science was also commonly applied to theosophy, in terms of the new theories of the time regarding physics and psychology. These topics were a source of inspiration for the artists being discussed, which are Wassily Kandinsky, Hilma af Klint, Kasimir Malevich, and Frantisek Kupka.

I will also be discussing how my work as a painter over the 2016/2017 school year was informed by my research.

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## **Introduction**

At the beginning of the 20th century abstraction was “invented” by a few men, Wassily Kandinsky, Kasimir Malevich, Frantisek Kupka and Piet Modrian, to name a few key players, although there seemed to be many that contributed. The through line for all of these artists is that their paintings were of spiritual subject matter. Theosophy was a metaphysical current that trickled through Europe at the turn of the 20th century, and became attractive to many artists and intellectuals. Theosophy is a philosophy that sought to imbue modern thought with spirituality, using Indian ideas as well as global spiritual knowledge and the efforts of clairvoyants. The path of this intellectual movement intersected with these artists during their careers, shaping their work. As well as engaging heavily with both accepted and occult science, theosophy also had a lot to say about the role of art and the imagination in society and the universe.

It is my argument that these artists were aided by theosophy in developing their pioneering abstraction at some level, and that through knowledge of theosophy their paintings can be better understood. This is an accepted argument, one that has been thoroughly written about in art history literature. It is widely known that in the circles that early abstractionists moved in, theosophy was a commonly read and discussed topic. What I will add to the literature is a much more thorough description of theosophy and its specific links to artistic inspiration, going a little further in depth about the actual teachings of theosophy than other authors. I will also be writing from the perspective of a contemporary artist, trying to directly use and borrow ideas and modes of thought from early abstractionists to see if they have a place in my art practice as a painter. Throughout this year I have tried to create a body of work related to my

research, in an attempt to learn what it means for an artist to visually integrate theosophical ideas.

The first few lines of Kandinsky's book on his artistic vision "Concerning the Spiritual in Art" is:

"Every work of art is the child of its age and, in many cases, the mother of our emotions. It follows that each period of culture produces an art of its own which can never be repeated. Efforts to revive the art-principles of the past will at best produce an art that is still-born."<sup>1</sup>

This brings me to my experiment. I am an art student who produces work as part of my degree. I am at a very early stage in my progress as an artist, and I have not actually been painting seriously for long, but it is a mode of expression that I have found to be a compelling way of discussing content.

Abstract painting of the early 20th century quickly began to stand out sharply to me as I started to take art and art history courses for my major, because it is both mysterious and intuitive at the same time. When I stood in front of Kandinsky's paintings at the Guggenheim in New York a year ago there was something that made me feel like I could read his work, and that I was very interested in finding out why the ideas he wanted to express had to find their outlet through abstraction.

The more I researched the topic the more I came back to theosophy, and the use of abstraction as a way of accessing ideas of spirituality. My experiment, therefore, was to learn about the teachings of theosophy, focusing on what some of my favorite artists got out of it, and produce work informed by what I learn and experience. Since I am not a European artist working during the early 1900's will my work be "stillborn?" At the

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<sup>1</sup> Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Translated by Michael T.H. Sadler, Project Gutenberg, 1911, [www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5321/pg5321-images.html](http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5321/pg5321-images.html). Accessed online, no page numbers.



time that these artists were working, physics and other scientific fields were having some early breakthroughs, leading to an impetus to unite religion and science as the world of academia lurched forward. Was this a special moment in history that has no bearing in the world today? Can I be inspired by the same thoughts as the artist I will study?

What I am doing in my project is to try, as Kandinsky said, "...to awaken [the] capacity for experiencing the spiritual in material and in abstract phenomena."<sup>2</sup>, using the scholarship of famous artists, but creating my own work. Theosophical literature has lots of highly technical descriptions of occult science and clairvoyant experiments, spanning the microscopic up through the universal. It was frankly a strange experience to read and think about mystical, outdated, quasi-scientific thought as a modern, educated individual. I also exposed myself to big spiritual and philosophical ideas that seem to actually be good advice to practicing artists, especially the artistic values laid out in Rudolf Steiner's speeches on the topic. Clearly, theosophical teachings have something to offer the creative intellectual, since they may very well have been responsible for an important trajectory in modern art.

Researching the spiritual ideas behind the paintings of Kandinsky, Klint, Kupka, and Melevitch also tremendously helped me understand their work and was truly illuminating in terms of my questions about theosophy and abstract art. The written portion of this project will be an investigation into the spiritual thoughts used by these artists, as well as how their work has impacted me and has helped spawn my paintings.

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Kuspitt, "Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art." *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, Edited by Maurice Tuchman, Abbeville Press Publishers, 1986, p 313.

As a society it seems that we are at a height of materialism, and perhaps a low of spirituality. Kandinsky devotes some of his Concerning the Spiritual in Art to discussing rising materialism enveloping spirituality, little knowing that materialism would be on the verge of destroying the environment within one hundred years. If materialism and consumerism and possibly cynicism are at all-time highs, then according to Kandinsky spirituality must be scarce. Perhaps then, instead of exploring the present environment with my art I should be trying to reach for the knowledge of an earlier time, as perhaps that's a richer subject matter. I have no problem with turning my gaze backwards as an artist if many of the issues being dealt with at the turn of the twentieth century are still unresolved or worse. There was not a mass spiritual shift guided by an idealistic movement in art, so I feel like continuing to try.

### **Introduction to Theosophy**

The official Theosophical Society was founded in 1870 by Helena Blavatsky, a Russian noblewoman who had travelled widely in Asia, and Colonel Olcott, a respected American Civil War veteran (Northern side). They met at a séance-type event hosted by a mutual friend, and bonded over spiritualism, eventually coming to form a society based on three official bylaws: "1. To form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color. 2. To promote the study of Aryan and other Eastern literature, religions and sciences and vindicate its

importance. 3. To investigate unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in humanity.”<sup>3</sup>

This organization established branches throughout Europe and America, but seemed at the time when it was governed by Blavatsky and Olcott to have most of its engagement in India, where the organization set up thirty-nine branches of operation, and twenty-seven schools for the teaching of Sanskrit in the 1880's. Blavatsky and Olcott were well-received by Indian scholars, engaging with them widely and starting “The Theosophist” magazine based on their extensive correspondences. Members of the Theosophical Society got along so well with Indian cultural leaders that they were targeted by Christian missionaries.<sup>4</sup>

The society got money in its first decades from modest membership fees, and the sale of “The Theosophist” magazine and Helena Blavatsky’s books. Two past International Presidents of the organization have been women (not counting Blavatsky), with Annie Besant being named president in 1908, before women's suffrage in the UK or America. Blavatsky was effectively the mind behind the formation of the society, and she produced a huge amount of widely read literature.

While it doesn't seem like there is much specific charity involvement, the Society is aligned with the intellectual pursuit of humanitarianism. In a letter to the American assembly Blavatsky stated that,

“Theosophists are of necessity the friends of all movements in the world, whether intellectual or simply practical, for the amelioration of all mankind. We are the friends of all those who fight drunkenness, against cruelty towards animals, against injustice to women, against corruptions

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<sup>3</sup> American Theosophical Society bylaws (unchanged from original society’s bylaws). The Bylaws of the Official Theosophical Society of America, [http://www.theosophical.org/files/local\\_groups/NationalBylaws1999.pdf](http://www.theosophical.org/files/local_groups/NationalBylaws1999.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Kirby Van Mater, Introduction, H.P. Blavatsky to the American Conventions 1888-1891, pp. 3.

in society or government...We are the friends of those who exercise practical charity, who seek to lift a little of the tremendous weight of misery that is crushing down on the poor.”<sup>5</sup>

So what is theosophy? To answer this question I will be paraphrasing from Helena Blavatsky’s The Key To Theosophy, as this book is intended to answer that question for curious researchers. The aim of the movement is to unite all religious areas of study under a universal brotherhood, with the motto of the society being “There is no religion higher than truth.”, and to unite these religions under core values.<sup>6</sup> This goal comes from the idea that all separate religions branch off a “Wisdom-Religion” that was more universal in ancient times and was advanced by various scholars throughout early societies.<sup>7</sup> Blavatsky also endorses the idea that as well as there being a root religion, there is a common source of physical life, explained by Darwinism, and that based on this there should be a concept of universal brotherhood. The materialism of secular science does not allow this idea to flourish because it is more focused on describing nature than discussing the implications of this for the community of humanity.<sup>8</sup>

Theosophists can belong to any religion, and engage in personal study that abides by the ethics of the society. Those who are lay-members benefit from the society in that they receive community and knowledge from the society.<sup>9</sup> That said, Theosophy is an esoteric and exoteric practice, meaning that there is an outer and inner circle of knowledge. The inner circle concerns itself with the occult sciences.

Occult Science is defined in Blavatsky’s handy Theosophical Glossary as:

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. pp. 7.

<sup>6</sup> H.P. Blavatsky, Edited by Clara M. Codd. *The Key to Theosophy*, 1953, pp. 2-3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. pp. 4-7.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pp. 19-21.

“The science of the secrets of nature- physical and psychic, mental and spiritual; called Hermetic and Esoteric Sciences. In the West, the Kabbalah may be named; in the East, mysticism, magic, and yoga philosophy... These sciences are, and have been for ages, hidden from the vulgar for the very good reason that they would never be appreciated by the selfish educated class , nor understood by the uneducated; whilst the former might misuse them for their own profit, and thus turn the divine science into *black magic*.”<sup>10</sup>

This refers to the “adepts” of theosophy, who practice clairvoyance, but do so for the betterment of man, and under the rigors of science. The study of occult science does often seem to rely on those gifted with psychic powers, and seeks to explain those phenomena and use people with these gifts as tools for study. For instance, in Annie Besant’s book Thought Forms, occult researchers describe and draw images of the shapes and colors that they see emerge around someone when they have thoughts.

That outlines the general framework of what I mean when I use the term “Theosophy”, and gives some context to what it would have meant for someone to be interested in the theosophical movement in the early twentieth century. What draws me to this topic, is that this expansive network of researchers were trying to create a culture where the deep mysteries of what it means to be a human could be discussed. The literature surrounding theosophy deals with spirituality as a science, and takes things such as auras and astral projections as factual and observable experiences that need to be researched.

In the modern world there is so much that cannot be explained by science, and even if we think we know something it might not be true. In Concerning the Spiritual in Art, Kandinsky writes about how society can be thought of as a tiered triangle, with those at the lower levels being individuals who do not have a spiritual life and live

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<sup>10</sup> H.P. Blavatsky, and G. R. S Mead, *The Theosophical Glossary*, Theosophy Press, 1990, p. 237.

through the insights and discoveries of others. Kandinsky's triangle moves upwards, with those who can explain and justify their beliefs passing down this knowledge to the lower levels, so that thought does generally move forwards, and intellectuals pass established ideas to the masses. Because of this idea of societal progress, those at the upper levels of the triangle feel uncertainty in everything, because the ideas that were once accepted are now archaic, and therefore they have the concern that no question will ever be solved. At the top of the triangle are those who embrace the uncertainty of everything:

“There work is going on which boldly attacks those pillars which men have set up. There we find other professional men of learning who test matter again and again, who tremble before no problem, and who finally cast doubt on that very matter which was yesterday the foundation of everything, so that the whole universe is shaken.”<sup>11</sup>

These are people who don't take anything in the world for granted, or accept any explanation as final. When this quote was brought up in my painting class last year someone disagreed, saying that there are constant, knowable things, and he cited death as one of those things. The instructor (Sylvan Lionni) responded by mentioning research at its very beginning, in which scientists are studying telomeres, the parts of our DNA that dictate aging, and trying to see if there is any way to change them so humans do not age. Today in society nobody dies of smallpox, tomorrow perhaps no one will die of old age.

Theosophy simply does not take the human soul for granted. In an age where organized religion seemed to be inching towards materialism, and science was doing

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<sup>11</sup> Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Translated by Michael T.H. Sadler, Project Gutenberg, 1911, [www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5321/pg5321-images.html](http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5321/pg5321-images.html). Accessed online, so I do not have page numbers.

away with the soul through new discoveries about the body, theosophy looked to mine science, and the world religions, for explanations for the experience of having a soul.

This is where the occult comes in. A main line of study for the authors of this movement was trying to explain human consciousness in physical terms. The experience of having awareness, thoughts, and a personality are things that both psychology and philosophy are still wrestling with. The issue is one that stems from the incongruence created by the sensation that people have when they realize that they are made of physical matter, but have a sense of self, which is sometimes called the Mind-Body Problem.

What is a thought? What is a memory? From my own perspective, it does seem like there is a tiny version of me in my head controlling all my actions, but what would she be made out of? Or perhaps I have a glowing soul that animates me and could be pulled out of my body through some supernatural process?

Functionalism was a way of thinking about this problem proposed in 1896 by John Dewey, "Functionalism says that mental states are constituted by their causal relations to one another and to sensory inputs and behavioral outputs."<sup>12</sup> This theory makes mental processing somewhat analogous to a computer processor, where there is a sensory input and all thoughts, even complex ones, are a direct reaction. This theory works well with physicalism, the viewpoint that everything in the body is physical, and that there is no separate mental sphere at all, just cells and impulses.

Theories like this do not really light the spiritual imagination on fire, especially if a person is also interested in visual occult phenomenon. If a clairvoyant

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<sup>12</sup> Ned Block, "What is functionalism?" a revised version of the entry on functionalism in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy Supplement*, Macmillan, 1996, <http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/philo/faculty/block/papers/functionalism.html>

had literally seen a human soul separate from a body, then discussing psychology in terms of moving parts would be very unsatisfying. The Theosophical Society took issue with materialist science that only studied what could be observed with the normal senses, and did not engage with the human soul, or with the possibility for higher planes of existence.

Luckily for the occult scientists, physics was dipping into the world of the unseen heavily. Incoming discoveries pointed to forces that were not observable, and instead were made of vibrations, or energy flowing through etheric matter.

“X-rays, discovered by Roentgen in 1895, made solid matter transparent and raised fundamental questions about the adequacy of the eye as a sensing instrument. Further challenges to the solidity of matter followed with Becquerel’s discovery of radioactivity in 1896, J. J. Thomson’s identification of the electron in 1897, and, especially, the subsequent work of the Curies and Ernest Rutherford on radioactivity. Popular science writers regularly suggested that all matter might be radioactive, offering the image of objects endlessly emitting particles into the surrounding ether.”<sup>13</sup>

This emerging body of knowledge was incendiary for those investigating the invisible forces of the soul, because something invisible like radioactivity or X-rays could be more easily classified in the same school of thought as auras, or astral projections. If there were forces moving through space that were real, but nobody could see them, then the excuse that nobody could “see” a soul and therefore souls were not real, did not hold up as well anymore. Clairvoyants became the Geiger counters of occult science. The goal of the extensive literature produced by the Theosophical Society was not to sell an intriguing account of unexplainable magic occurrences, or to

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<sup>13</sup> Linda Dalrymple Henderson, “The Forgotten Meta-Realities of Modernism: Die Uebersinnliche Welt and the International Cultures of Science and Occultism.” Glass Bead, 2016, [www.glass-bead.org/article/the-forgotten-meta-realities-of-modernism/?lang=enview](http://www.glass-bead.org/article/the-forgotten-meta-realities-of-modernism/?lang=enview).



tell stories of ghosts, or teach mysticism or witchcraft. The goal was to incorporate the unseen realm into the scientific conversation. Rudolf Steiner writes in his 1909 book

Outline of Occult Science:

“Occult science desires to free the natural-scientific method and its principle of research from their special application that limits them, in their own sphere, to the relationship and process of sensory facts, but, at the same time, it wants to retain their way of thinking and other characteristics. It desires to speak about the non-sensory in the same way natural science speaks about the sensory.”<sup>14</sup>

At the beginning of the 20th century intellectuals wanted to know about science, and at that time invisible forces were exciting discoveries. These new ways of thinking about particles and energy, paired with a blossoming of occult writings and discoveries, made it so that images of vibrations, waves, and the physical manifestations of the soul were on the minds of many.

“...it can be demonstrated that there was an international culture of occultism as well as of science, which readily transcended national borders. Like the internet today, these ideas travelled rapidly on networks formed by monthly occult journals reporting on developments from all over Europe and America and even further destinations (India, particularly, for the Theosophists).”<sup>15</sup>

Researchers wanted to get physical proof of the soul, in an illustration, concise description, or even a photograph. In 1985 Baron Carl von Reichenbach published Researches on Magnetism, Electricity, Heat and Light in their Relations to Vital Forces, a book about his experiments with the “odic force”, a sort of electromagnetic field that he had observed coming off of magnets, crystals, and people. He does research that indicates that those who are in poor health, or those who are extremely nervous are able

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<sup>14</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *An Outline of Occult Science*. Translated by Maud and Henry B Monges. Anthroposophic Press, Inc., 1972, p.6.

<sup>15</sup> Linda Dalrymple Henderson, “The Forgotten Meta-Realities of Modernism: Die Uebersinnliche Welt and the International Cultures of Science and Occultism.” Glass Bead, 2016, [www.glass-bead.org/article/the-forgotten-meta-realities-of-modernism/?lang=enview](http://www.glass-bead.org/article/the-forgotten-meta-realities-of-modernism/?lang=enview).

to see light coming off of magnets, and feel physical sensations on their skin when a magnet is passed over them. He showed a series of young women strong magnets while they sat in a dark room. The women would then give descriptions of light coming off of the ends of the magnets, in a vapor-like flame. He does very careful experiments with the objects he studies, observing whether they have heat, or can be photographed, or can only be seen in the dark, trying to find universal properties of this force.<sup>16</sup>

Dr. Hippolyte Baraduc became known in the early 1900s for using photography to capture “The Fluidic Invisible”, a separate body made of “Odic Fluid”,<sup>17</sup> that exists as a binding intermediary between the physical body and the soul. He was very inspired by Baron Carl von Reichenbach, and it does seem like the next step of Reichenbach’s work to try to photograph the forces he wrote about. Just as with Reichenbach, careful measurements were taken, and results were meant to be replicable. Can vital force work in a vacuum? Can it be felt through a block of ice? Could his measurements be affected by confounding factors?

Annie Besant, became president of the Theosophical Society in 1907, during a career that featured leading movements for women’s rights, freemasonry, and socialism. Thought Forms, a book she published with a close collaborator C.W. Leadbeater in 1901, deals with the idea that the thoughts we have can be seen by clairvoyants as physical objects. In the introduction she makes a poignant statement about theosophy and science:

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<sup>16</sup> Baron Carl von Reichenbach, *Researches on Magnetism, Electricity, Heat and Light in their Relations to Vital Forces*, Taylor, Walton and Maberly, 1850.

<sup>17</sup> Hippolyte Baraduc, *The Human Soul : Its Movements, Its Lights, and the Iconography of the Fluidic Invisible*, Librairie Internationale de la Pensée Nouvelle, 1913, p. 20.

“The fact is that science has pressed its researches so far, has used such rare ingenuity in its questionings of nature, has shown such tireless patience in its investigations, that it is receiving the reward of those who seek, and forces and beings of the next higher plane of nature are beginning to show themselves on the outer edge of the physical field. "Nature makes no leaps," and as the physicist nears the confines of his kingdom he finds himself bewildered by touches and gleams from another realm which interpenetrates his own. He finds himself compelled to speculate on invisible presences, if only to find a rational explanation for undoubted physical phenomena, and insensibly he slips over the boundary, and is, although he does not yet realise it, contacting the astral plane.”<sup>18</sup>

This quote so perfectly sums up how theosophy fits into the scientific knowledge of the time. Theosophy was not taking an anti-science perspective, it was actually pushing for scientific development in the areas of the unseen. Theosophy advocates for the research of things that are unobservable by laymen, and pushes research to incorporate recorded clairvoyant experiences. “Nature makes no leaps”, is the key phrase here, meaning that Besant thinks that as humans gain more knowledge about their world they will come to understand their spiritual lives as well, and that there is no chasm between science and religion for humanity to leap across, and instead there is only truths to be revealed about the nature of the universe. As science edges into describing more complex forces it will also begin describing the nature of the soul. The danger that Blavatsky speaks of comes from this research remaining separate from spirituality, and therefore missing the potential yields for spiritual knowledge, and only focusing on the material, and on earthly existence. The end result for gaining true understanding about the universe is that humanity becomes less focused on the value of the material and more on the value of the spiritual life, which could yield a more moral, united humanity.

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<sup>18</sup> Annie Besant, and C.W Leadbeater. *Thought-Forms*. The Theosophical Publishing House, 1901, Project Gutenberg, [www.gutenberg.org/files/16269/16269-h/16269-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16269/16269-h/16269-h.htm), Online source without page numbers.

Karma is dealt with in occult science according to Rudolf Steiner, in that when a person harms another person it mars their own soul and they have to relive that harm upon death.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps if everyone believed in this conception of the soul the physical world would be more kind. Also if every person also exists on an astral plane as well as the physical one there are not real divisions among humanity, and the idea of a “Universal brotherhood” seems logical and realistic. And who cares about wealth if the material world is just a mask for a non-physical universe? This is why Besant writes so optimistically about science, because if the existence of the soul can be proven to humanity, then the goals of theosophy could be achieved.

What I’ll mention now is that I have studied this topic at what I can only call a surface level. In my research I focused on what I thought would be useful for my understanding of abstract art, I did not read The Secret Doctrine, or very much of Blavatsky’s work at all, because it is very extensive and I did not think it would focus my project. What I wanted to do was find texts that provided direct information about the ideas that the artists I’m studying used in their work. These artists engaged much deeper than I have. I do not really know much about theosophy at all, and I do not claim that I do. Part of this project was to see if through studying theosophy I could understand early abstraction better, and from what I’ve learned in the past year I would say that I have succeeded. It has been very illuminating for me to read about what I have discussed in the context of the artists that I will mention.

In my research I found myself sucked in by the idea of science, religion, and art finding a meeting place. I enjoyed reading about old-time experiments conducted with

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<sup>19</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *An Outline of Occult Science*. Translated by Maud and Henry B Monges. Anthroposophic Press, Inc., 1972, p. 69-70.

the aid of psychic individuals. This line of research was seductive to me because it told a narrative of free-thinkers who used creative inference to explore the world, which in turn inspired artists.

The work I have created for this project came from the passing fancies I had while reading these texts about auras and astral projection, as well as accounts of what the artists that I studied were inspired by. I do not really know if I can say that my work was inspired by theosophy because I genuinely do not understand it with much depth, but theosophy was the main thread of my research and when I read theosophical texts it was with the intention of using them in my art.

An amazing testament to how little I understand this topic is that very late in my research it finally reached my attention that Blavatsky viewed multiple races of the earth as “sub-human” and that her teachings would one day be distilled into what would become Nazism. She invented the idea of “root races”, and the idea of the Aryan race, which is supposedly the racial pinnacle of existence. I initially interpreted “Aryan” in the Theosophical Bylaws to mean the sanskrit version of the word, which is an ethnic self-designation, instead of the more modern interpretation which includes Europeans. In terms of the bylaws this may be a more correct interpretation, since it discusses language, but it does seem that the meaning Nazis use was derived from Blavatsky.

Rudolf Steiner seemed to be even more interested in “root races”, and believed and disseminated the idea that white, nordic Europeans are the most spiritually evolved race and the end product of reincarnation, and that when races are targeted by colonization and genocide it is due to the natural progression of the spirit. His teachings included frankly disgusting, vile things about Native Americans and Black people.

Theosophy, and Steiner's version of it Anthroposophy, have core teachings that are destructively racist and put white people at the top of a cosmically inspired hierarchy, and in addition probably indirectly contributed to the racism and nationalism that lead to the holocaust. During WWII Anthroposophists both sympathized and aided the Nazis.<sup>20</sup> I do not excuse these views as a product of their times, and these are not acceptable ideologies for anyone to identify themselves with in my opinion.

None of this turned up in my reading. When Steiner is mentioned this part of his philosophy is left out. A main text I used was a compilation of essays called The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985, which has a whole multi-page entry about Steiner, and multiple writers mention him extensively throughout the whole book, yet there is no mention of his ethnocentric ideologies. Discussions of theosophy also conveniently leave out that an ideal "universal brotherhood" would not include everybody.

I also could have left it out, as the Steiner texts I read pertaining to abstract art do not mention race at all, and instead focus on the human soul generally and spiritual progress in terms of reconnection with other planes of existence. None of the discussions of metaphysics that I read mentioned race either.

I am left with a nauseous feeling. If behind all the discussions of the soul I have read there was the implicit agreement that some humans are lesser-than, then the whole of what I have been studying has been written through a racist filter. I honestly feel racist for not intuitively realizing that what I was reading was written through a certain lens, and for focusing so much on European source material. Maybe I have a false bias

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Staudenmaier. "Anthroposophy and Ecofascism., People for Legal Nonsectarian Schools, 2007, [www.waldorfcritics.org/articles/Anthroposophy-and-Ecofasc.htm](http://www.waldorfcritics.org/articles/Anthroposophy-and-Ecofasc.htm).

of assuming artists are inclusive. On the one hand I feel awful for studying something that covertly supports the idea of a dominant race, on the other I'm glad that I've included this information in my thesis because it is conspicuously left out of a lot of discussion around this topic. I think that theosophy's connection to science, art, and Nazism need to be discussed simultaneously. It's entirely possible to study this branch of spirituality's impact on art without mentioning that it was an exclusionary spirituality, as many authors have, but to do so is to leave out something crucial that colors the whole discussion. I do not intend to defend myself for seriously engaging with theosophy without fully realizing the implications, I do want to say that I do not support any concept of racial superiority, but as a white person I do not think it is productive to be defensive about whether I am racist. The fact that I was blind to the biases existing in the literature I was reading proves that I am acting under a worldview that I need to examine. Artists should always be examining their work for bias and seeking the truth behind what they are saying.

I will now move on to discussing particular artists and art history. I do not discuss the racial bias of specific artists, but they may have all been aware of the racial bias implicit in theosophy. I would love to do a further research project about whether racial superiority was a force in early abstract art, and may well do so in the future.

### **Art and Theosophy**

“Abstract art remains misunderstood by the majority of the viewing public. Most people in fact consider it meaningless. Yet around 1910, when groups of artists moved away from representational art towards abstraction, preferring symbolic color to natural color, signs to perceived reality, ideas to direct observation it was never an outright dismissal of meaning. Instead, artists made an effort to draw upon deeper and more

varied level of meaning, the most pervasive of which was that of the spiritual.”<sup>21</sup>

Deciding what to paint is obviously something painters face every time they find themselves in front of a freshly primed canvas. They may think that they should add something valuable to the world that does not already exist, a visual argument, or exploration, or something beautiful perhaps. The idea of painting something without meaning seems impossible, because to produce an image implies a personal synthesis of ideas. Early abstractionists took the popular philosophy that they were exposed to and reiterated it as images. They did this possibly because theosophy seems to have a lot to say about introspection and the creative process, as well as because the occult sciences present a lot of ideas that are explained well visually. I will be examining what theosophy offered artists in terms of inspiration, starting with an explanation of the interaction between theosophy and art, as well as the particular inspiration a few famous artists gleaned from their exposure to it.

The art that I will be primarily discussing falls into what is called Expressionism, though the lines between Cubism, Futurism, Symbolism, and Impressionism and all other concurrent and overlapping movements are not very clear. But I think it's safe to say I'm writing about Expressionism. To quote Rose-Carol Washton Long in the anthology The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985, “Expressionism was associated with a new religion of mysticism, with the

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<sup>21</sup> Maurice Tuchman. “Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art.” *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, Edited by Maurice Tuchman, Abbeville Press Publishers, 1986, p. 17.



cosmic, and with universalism.”<sup>22</sup> In reading about this topic, it seems clear that there were artists who interacted with symbolist ideas and moved past those ideas into abstraction that was based in dynamic color and form. Art of course follows and comments on society, so it may be interesting to examine what in society corresponds to this movement.

Industrialization overtook Europe and the US from the mid-1700s until the 20th century, shifting society from communities to cities and cities to manufacturing hubs. Capitalism had become mechanized and the working population was increasingly being sealed up in factories. Explaining the effect of the industrial revolution on each country it affected seems a bit off topic, but generally industry was transforming society dramatically and quickly. Building materials and textiles could be mass produced, and train travel was rapidly emerging by the mid-1800s.<sup>23</sup>

This huge shift in technology then led to a push against materialism. Not only was the world becoming more consumerist through the production of affordable goods, but it was becoming mechanized, automated. It was moving away from the natural, and perhaps from the spiritual. A woman hand-spinning a cloth has a soul, a power loom does not.

All this shifting was accompanied by big ideas in science that had the potential to erode classic religion. The theory of evolution sought to explain every organism as existing in its current form based on the environment, without the hand of a creator. Functionalism and behaviorism in psychology described mental processes based on

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<sup>22</sup> Rose-Carol Washton Long, “Expressionism, Abstraction, and the Search for Utopia in Germany.” *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, Edited by Maurice Tuchman, Abbeville Press Publishers, 1986, p. 201.

<sup>23</sup> “Industrial Revolution”, History Channel, 2009, <http://www.history.com/topics/industrial-revolution>

behavioral outcomes, not the ineffable human spirit. Physics was trying to explain big things that people took for granted like light, and discovering things that were unheard of, like radiation. The new world needed a new spirituality, and that spirituality needed a new way of painting.

Before abstraction, the spirit was in painting, but it was present figuratively. The intense emotions of renaissance art were achieved through oil paints made to look like the living skin of Jesus, for instance. Devotion was expressed in detail. To paint in shocking realism and accurate perspective is essentially materialist, because one is literally trying to capture the material world. To change the course of spirituality through art, artists needed a new language.

Rudolf Steiner spoke extensively about the functional place of art in the spiritual life as it relates to Anthroposophy, his own offshoot of Theosophy that was similar in core values, but with a more Christian and nationalist slant. In a translated collection of his speeches called The Arts and Their Mission, he lays out an argument for art as a way of engaging with the spiritual side of the world as opposed to only the sensual. These speeches are valuable in trying to determine how artists took metaphysics and applied them to art, as well as what spirituality could offer an artist in terms of creating progress in the arts through new ways of making images.

Steiner lays out a concept of human history that charts how humanity's focus in the arts have shifted from a direct engagement with the spiritual world in Pre-Christ history to the modern age, where artists have been hindered by a pattern of engaging more with the physical world. His argument is that early humans felt themselves to be a part of the cosmos and did not question the existence of their non-physical bodies. As

humanity aged, people gradually turned their attention to seeing themselves as intimately involved with nature and grew more united with the earth. Focus then moved in ancient Greece to the body, and then in the Roman empire to the mind, the epoch we are still in. Steiner feels that in the present age we are close to being able to see the spiritual in the physical world as well as our own bodies, but are detached from both the spiritual and physical bodies.<sup>24</sup>

He charts the patterns of art history vaguely along those terms as well, with artistic traditions focusing on patterns and bright colors in ancient human history, and then moving into a perfection of human form, then to a perfection of the material. Steiner is broadly simplifying both art and human history, but he builds an argument about how art at the time of his speech was trying to move back to a form of art more akin to what humanity can remember from existing in a non-human form. This would mean a departure from trying to reproduce a perfect version of an object, and instead into art that reproduced something transmitted from the non-physical world that all people experience, therefore producing a universally effective piece of art.

Steiner's philosophy of art calls for an end to trying to replicate nature, because it in no way needs replicating. There is no need to paint a sunset because they happen every day and everyone knows how great they are.

“A real painter never imitates. He uses an object as a recipient or focus of the sun, or to observe a color reflex in that object's surroundings, or to catch, above it, an interweaving of light and darkness. In other words the thing painted is merely an inducement.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *The Arts and Their Mission*. Translated by Lisa D. Monges and Virginia Moore, Anthroposophic Press, Inc., 1967, pp. 1-14.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 71.

The value of painting is to capture the universe interacting with the object, or in the case of abstraction to just paint the forces, to just paint the light. If human beings remember the forms of the world from their experience as a spiritual being then color is a way of crafting those forms, because color is quite literally the universe bringing out properties of earthly objects.

I think that Steiner in these speeches is summarizing the part of Theosophy that was compelling for artists, which was that art had a significant potential for communicating images from a part of the human experience that humanity was no longer in touch with. Steiner argues that art so closely seems to correspond with, and be evidence of, the spiritual evolution of humanity, therefore the next stage in art must correspond to the next stage of spirituality. In this text this is presented as humanity ceasing to take for granted the forces of the universe that act on the non-physical plane, and to “remember” what that plane is like from the times before birth and after death.

Wassily Kandinsky gave up a career as an economist and law scholar in order to become a painter, a fact which in my studies has often been framed as a contradiction, like there’s this huge chasm between being an academic and being an artist. I do want to comment on this weird perceived division, because I could very well have not studied art because of it, and because it pertains to the topic. I’m going to venture to say that Kandinsky was a better painter because of his doctorate, and that he was a better law/economics student because he was artistic. Logic is aided by creativity and vice versa, there is no “logical left brain” and “creative right brain”, simply because that is a literally false idea. This is the type of artist that I want to be, an academically rigorous one that uses every kind of knowledge to solve the problems that my work presents.

This is a reason why I am so attracted to the idea that it was a creative kind of science, coupled with the rigorous interpretation of artists, that birthed an art movement that really shaped painting in the modern age. These artists are so commonly taught and discussed, but I think it is valuable to frame their work as a study of metaphysics. At the same time I think that it is important to not discredit the mysticism that played a part in these studies, as it seems that this mysticism was a reaction to the science of the time.

Kandinsky approached painting from a perspective of wanting to advance it. He clearly saw himself at the top of that shifting triangle he describes in On the Spiritual in Art. The very fact that Kandinsky produced a manifesto about his philosophy and style of work does imply that he wanted this information about how he paints to be disseminated, and for it to potentially inspire a new era of painting.

“On the Spiritual in art links a new style of painting, abstraction, with the coming of a new utopia; the messianic tone of his book and the radical nature of his paintings contributed to the assessment that Kandinsky was “nothing less than the representative of a new idealism.” In such assessments the critics were reacting to Kandinsky’s praise of theosophy and other occult groups, to his assimilation of brilliant, painterly Fauve and expressionist colors and textures, and to his claim that abstraction had the greatest potential for the forceful expression of cosmic ideas.”<sup>26</sup>

Kandinsky took what he had been absorbing from theosophy and other contemporary painters and produced work that sought to advance the medium, and participate with the occult view of art. To Kandinsky, artists and scholars were tasked with advancing society, and he found in abstraction an artistic language that he felt had

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<sup>26</sup> Rose-Carol Washton Long, “Expressionism, Abstraction, and the Search for Utopia in Germany.” *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, Edited by Maurice Tuchman, Abbeville Press Publishers, 1986, p. 202.

the potential to advance society by it being more connected to humanity's spiritual life.

He writes in Concerning the Spiritual in Art:

“The spiritual life, to which art belongs and of which she is one of the mightiest elements, is a complicated but definite and easily definable movement forwards and upwards. This movement is the movement of experience. It may take different forms, but it holds at bottom to the same inner thought and purpose.”<sup>27</sup>

Steiner and Kandinsky talk about the spirituality of humanity as occurring in epochs, where humanity as a whole moves through regions of awareness. Both also seem to agree that humanity was in a state very separate from its spiritual life

In theosophy and other schools of spiritual thought there is the concept of the soul vibrating to produce thoughts and emotion, and Kandinsky strove to create art that vibrated the soul of the viewer on certain frequencies with color and shape.<sup>28</sup> In that way Kandinsky's work could be universal, since anyone with a soul would hypothetically appreciate it, and any viewer would connect with the paintings on a spiritual and intuitive level, making the abstraction meaningful. Rudolf Steiner also speaks extensively about the universal nature of abstract art, framing it as being more related to the universe that people “remember” from their time in the non-physical world. This seems to imply that there is a quality of image being sought after that interacts with viewers non-physical body through their physical visual system.

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<sup>27</sup> Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Translated by Michael T.H. Sadler, Project Gutenberg, 1911, [www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5321/pg5321-images.html](http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5321/pg5321-images.html). Accessed online, no page numbers.

<sup>28</sup> Maurice Tuchman. “Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art.” *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, Edited by Maurice Tuchman, Abbeville Press Publishers, 1986, p. 35.

Kandinsky was inspired by Steiner while writing On the Spiritual in Art, and they lived in Munich at the same time.<sup>29</sup>

Kandinsky was probably an actual synesthiac, a condition where sensory pathways in the brain are crossed or touching leading to people experiencing an unassociated sensory experience in response to stimuli, for example, seeing color in relationship to a sound. This would create a very enveloping, sensual experience of the world for Kandinsky, probably making him identify more with the ideas of thought forms and auras than the average reader. Waves and vibrations are common properties of sense perception and matter, discoveries that were happening during Kandinsky's career, so the soul as vibratory seems to make sense. These universal vibrations create a common thread between the soul, shape, and color, making the possibility of painting something that resonates spiritually, or depicts the unseen forces of the spirit: an exciting way to approach both the medium and the academia.



Figure 1. Wassily Kandinsky, Composition VII. 1913, Oil on Canvas, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

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<sup>29</sup> Rose-Carol Washton Long, "Expressionism, Abstraction, and the Search for Utopia in Germany." *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, Edited by Maurice Tuchman, Abbeville Press Publishers, 1986, p. 202.

Frantisek Kupka's vibrant, magical artwork dips into both charming illustration as well as bold abstraction. In terms of style, he was very different from Kandinsky and Melevitch, however he seems to clearly fit into the narrative of spiritual abstraction in Europe. His imaginative pieces draw from the same body of spiritual knowledge that the others drew from, tempered with a French Art Nouveau informed style, as well as a profound interest in mysticism and color. I find his work so beautiful because there is a clear interest in the human body that shines through, something that needs a voice when we are discussing theosophical spirituality since so much of it centers around the physical experience of humans.

Kupka grew up in a poor area of Bohemia, and instead of getting a higher education in philosophy, had an apprenticeship as a saddler. This saddler happened to also be a practicing medium who was active in local seances, something he exposed Kupka to, leading to Kupka himself practicing as a medium throughout his adult life.<sup>30</sup>

At seventeen he received a craft and design education in Czechoslovakia, and from there was educated in Vienna under Nazarene painters, a movement in German painting that emphasized painting religious scenes in the medieval style. While receiving this serious fine art education, Kupka engaged with his peers in much philosophical discussion, something that shaped what became a unique spiritual worldview and of course had an impact on his art. Theosophy became an important facet of his philosophical interest: "Theosophy was for Kupka at that time an ideal

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<sup>30</sup> Rowell, Margit, and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. František Kupka, 1871-1957: A Retrospective, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1975, p. 15.



practical philosophy that helped him to deepen his knowledge, brought him into contact with eastern philosophy and sustained him in the belief that life never dies.”<sup>31</sup>

Some of his abstract work is said to have come from creating points of reference for figures in the initial sketches for his paintings, and then leaving those reference points and painting around them to capture the movement behind the figures, and the intrinsic values of those forms.<sup>32</sup> For example, the retrospective text I am using for this paper tracks the evolution of an image of a woman in flowing clothing holding a large hoop, on through the abstraction of that form in the shape of fluid and intersecting ovals in the “Amorpha” series.

The abstract interpretation of the human body in both color and form in Kupka’s work is the value of it in regard to the narrative of theosophy, because so much of the discussion about the spiritual that I have been reading pertains to the spirit or astral body taking a physical form, or interacting with the physical world. In my own imagination it has been a bit of a puzzle to read about the overlay of the spiritual bodies over and through the physical world, and get a mental image that really seems to capture the essence of what the occult scientists are describing. It seems like Kupka’s abstractions upon the human form are meant to capture forces in man that are hard to imagine.

“For Kupka, art was the projection of the highest form of human spirituality through evocative and autonomous forms and colors. The artist does not reproduce nature; but nature is his model for understanding the universal cosmic order. The natural processes of growth, expansion, rotation, dilation, constriction, are visible inferences of rhythms, which man as part of the cosmic order, contains within his

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 33.

innermost being. These rhythms provide the structure of the artist's vision.”<sup>33</sup>

By frequently coupling human form and movement with colorful and lively abstraction, Kupka captures the convection currents and ebullience of the soul, while often keeping the human form present.

Kupka’s compositions of cosmic shift such as, “Animated Lines” or “Around a Point”, seem to be on a large scale, meaning that one gets the impression that the relationships they show are on a cosmic level. Kupka examines the big powerful physical relationships in the universe and the spiritual relationships they imply.



Figure 2: Frantisek Kupka, “Around a Point”, 1920, watercolor on paper, Gertrude Stein Gallery, New York.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 48.

What really made me want to pursue this thesis was when I was shown the work of Hilma af Klint, a contemporary of all the other artists I've mentioned, though not commonly remembered as a pioneer of abstraction for numerous reasons. Her paintings are wonderful to me. They are mysterious, dynamic images of a wide array of symbols and forms both geometric and organic, and when I saw her work for the first time I was very interested in the fact that they seem like diagrams of something. They have this strange intuitive property, and often an emphasis on dualities and forms that resemble properties of basic biology and matter.

Klint was Swedish, and went to school for art and worked as an artist at the very start of the 1900s. Klint was also very much a spiritualist, and had a clear interest in theosophy and the work of Rudolf Steiner, who was at the time of her artistic production, active in both the theosophical movement and the production of art in a variety of mediums. Evidence of this interest can be found not only in the work, but from entries in the extensive notebooks she kept. Despite being interested in the theosophical movement, she was not active in the scholarly communities and networks that other artists moved in. For much of her adult life she cared for her ill mother, making travel to European cultural centers impossible. She also only spoke Swedish, and therefore could only access literature that had been translated. Although she was exposed to Edvard Munch's work in the 1890s when it came to the building that she had her studio in.<sup>34</sup>

I was much more interested in her work when I found out that she had a group of five women that she would have séances with, where she would communicate with

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<sup>34</sup> Ake Fant, "The case of Hilma af Klint". *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, Edited by Maurice Tuchman, Abbeville Press Publishers, 1986, pp. 155-156.

higher beings that would give her guidance on what to paint. She also never participated in an exhibition, and stipulated that upon her death the paintings were to not be released for twenty years. It ended up taking over forty for them to be exhibited, which finally happened in 1986.<sup>35</sup> This is of course a compelling and dramatic story, and so deeply interesting because she was practicing automatic drawing long before it came into vogue, and was producing abstract work with the same motivations as the great fathers of abstraction, both before they were and without the benefit of collaboration or acclaim.

Her work seems like such a clear example of what I want to talk about in my thesis, which is the act of painting as a way of explaining something spiritual, both visually and in a non-representational way.

Hilma af Klint's practice was also incredibly involved, she had to feel the presence of literal higher beings, enter a meditative state, and have spiritual truths revealed to her, and then use her skill as a painter to diagram that experience. To me this almost does not seem like abstraction, because she was painting *something*, and often includes figures like flowers or symbols like hearts. According to her accounts, the forms that she painted were revealed to her during séances by archangel figures or "masters" that occupied a higher plane of existence and spoke to her from this place.<sup>36</sup> The paintings were her efforts to fulfil a vision prescribed to her. Her work is definitely abstraction, but she was working in such a way that her work is still an illustration, whereas the work of the 'fathers of abstract art' tend to seem more like explorations of

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<sup>35</sup> Maisie Skidmore, "Decoding the Spiritual Symbolism of Artist Hilma af Klint", AnOther, March 2016, <http://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/8490/decoding-the-spiritual-symbolism-of-artist-hilma-af-klint>.

<sup>36</sup> Ake Fant, "The case of Hilma af Klint". *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, Edited by Maurice Tuchman, Abbeville Press Publishers, 1986, p. 160.

form. I do not know if her process was meaningfully different than if an artist had a clear visualization of what they wanted to do, then sketched it, then painted it. Her work was also sometimes done in trance states, where it does appear that she was painting unconsciously due to incongruences with how she normally paints. This adds an experiential aspect to her work, and in order to really access it from the same point she did, it is my opinion that the viewer must see the work as if it is the product of a séance. In no way do I want to insinuate that af Klint was a fraud or a mentally ill person, I think that this is a situation where it behooves those studying her work to suspend disbelief.



Figure 3: Hilma af Klint, "Group X, No. 3, Altarpiece," Oil on Canvas, Albin Dahlstrom/Moderna Museet, 1915.



Figure 4: Hilma Af Klint, "Group IV, No.1, Childhood.", Oil on Canvas, Albin Dahlstrom/Moderna Museet, 1907.

Kasimir Malevich, according to himself, invented abstraction in 1913, in the form of his own school of art, Suprematism. Before this Malevich had experimented with other art movements popular at the time including Art Nouveau, Cubism, and Fauvism. Suprematism consisted of usually at least two shapes of solid color on a usually white background, arranged dynamically. He seemed to write about it like a next step from cubism, writing in From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The

New Painterly Realism: “The Cubo-Futurists assembled everything into a square and broke them up, but didn’t burn them up. Too bad!”<sup>37</sup>

Malevitch was perhaps not interested in burning “everything,” more so in freeing the subject in painting from its clumsy ties to the world of objects. Where cubists had revolutionarily disrupted and questioned form, Suprematism wanted to lose the object being disrupted. Like Kandinsky, Malevitch wanted to use color in order to move painting into the non-figurative, and do away with non-representative shapes, but unlike Kandinsky Malevich was not trying to really depict a spiritual world as much as he was trying to clear everything away from painting so that artists could truly paint, instead of endlessly copying nature and creating decorative works.

“The art of painting, sculpture, the word, was until now a camel loaded with all kinds of rubbish of odalisques, with Egyptian and Persian Kings, with Solomons, Salomes, princes, princesses and their favorite little dogs, with desire and the fornication of Venuses.”<sup>38</sup>

According to Suprematism, painting should be self-referential, totally intrinsic. His big remarkable piece in the exhibition that was his Suprematist debut was “Black Square” (or Black Quadrangle), which was of course just a black square. Despite this being almost humorously simple, the piece was famously hung wedged in the corner of the exhibition, in a position obvious to Russian viewers as the traditional place for a religious icon painting. It’s a little mysterious why he did that, but clearly it’s a comment on the weight that religious objects carry. The icon is charged with a meaning intrinsic to the object, as are Suprematist works.

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<sup>37</sup> Kazimir Malevich, Borchardt-Hume, Achim, Bouras, Alexander, and Tate Modern, Host Institution, *Malevich*, 2014, p. 92.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.



Viewers of this piece were supposed to look at the qualities of the black square only. “Creation is present in pictures only when there is form which borrows nothing already created in nature, but arises out of the painted masses without repeating and without altering the primary forms of the objects of nature.”<sup>39</sup> The black square does not represent anything in nature, and the square became the base shape of Suprematism because it does not really exist in nature. Viewers may appreciate the square, its position, and the quality of the black.

Malevich’s work possesses synchronicity with the atomic level, to singularities. The painting is reduced down to the absolute minimum properties of an image. Suprematist painting can conversely take on a cosmic dimension, where the dynamics of the shapes takes on significance as they drift on the plane of the canvas. Like planets arranged in a solar system, Malevich’s shapes have gravity in relationship to each other, and simply exist in the space. In that way Malevich’s work does resemble the art philosophy described in Steiner’s speeches in The Arts and Their Mission. Steiner prescribes painting the way the universe interacts with form, to paint using the oneness a human intuitively has with the universe if they are able to tap into that level of awareness. The way Malevich creates images that are an intellectual step back from the physical world, seems to put his shapes in a new and parallel physical dimension, like the fourth dimension or the ether.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

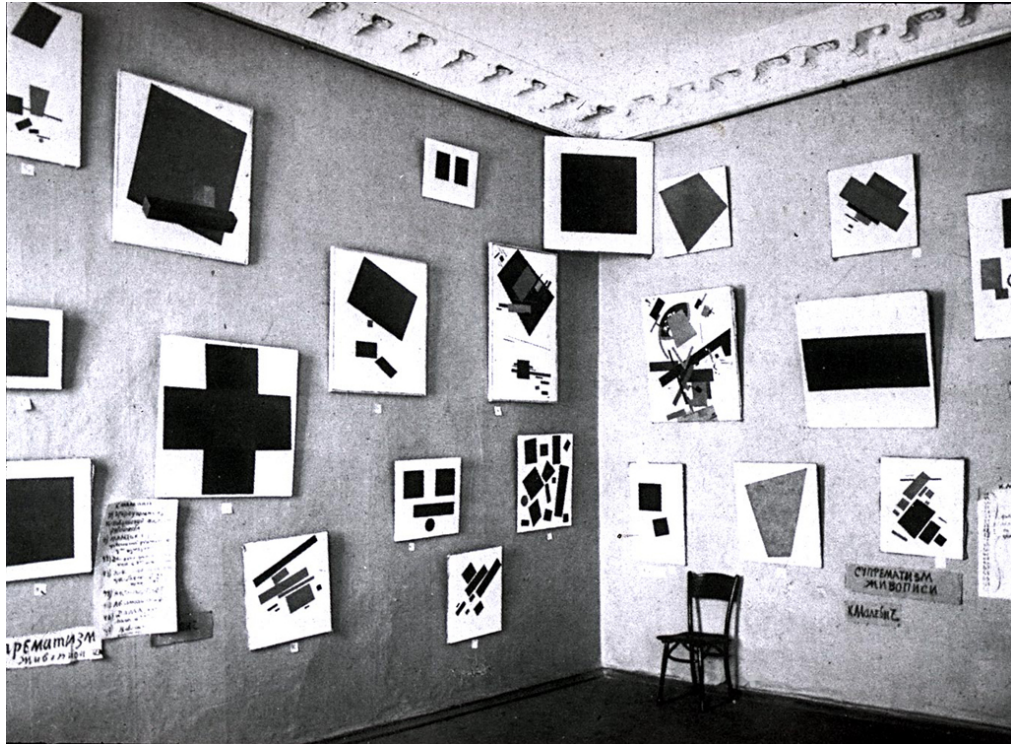


Figure 5: Malevich, Kasimir. *0.10 Exhibition Photo*. Petrograd, 1915.

### **My Own Work**

In a way, I saw an aura once. I was saying goodbye to a friend I had made during a long program for school, whom I would most likely not be able to see again for a long time due to her living far away from me. We had become fast friends and had a very academic, platonic relationship, marked by us being very good at making each other laugh. When it was the last day of the program and we were all saying goodbye, we made eye contact and shook hands, and in that moment I saw a golden glow around the edges of my vision, around her head and face. I remember actually seeing it and being bewildered, and being a bit tempted to look away from her face to see if the glow would remain, but I was totally wrapped up in saying goodbye so I didn't. I also felt warm, and very happy. I looked away and blinked eventually and the color went away. Then I left the room. I was certainly sleep deprived, and I was in a huge emotional

moment. My eyes were probably tired and were reacting to being under the florescent lights.

Or maybe my emotion has a color, and the substance of my emotions on the astral plane reached out to surround my friend. Or her aura of emotion for me was shining out to me, visible to me because I was on the same wavelength as somebody.

It does matter whether or not I interpret this as seeing an aura, because when someone refers to an aura they are referencing a specific extrasensory experience. If I believe that thought can become visible forms, then I saw an aura. If I don't, then my eyes were just playing a trick on me. The things that occult investigators wrote about were based on what they were characterizing as the visual evidence of physical properties. I include this anecdote because if I did absolutely prescribe to the literature that I have been reading, then I would have seen an aura and could explain my experience in those terms. I could then paint this experience of seeing my friend surrounded by a golden glow, like the light that hits the trees during a summer sunset.

However, the experience of not actually believing that I saw an aura or thought form means that this visual experience would be void of spiritual feeling. This was a deeply felt moment, the type of thing one could call 'touching,' as if it touched my soul. Thought forms are supposed to present themselves in moments of intense thought or feeling. But there is still a disconnect. If I was going to paint this moment I would have to paint the feelings behind it, to paint friendship and affection, and how at times those things do seem spiritual, because they are uplifting and make you feel emotionally healthy. Perhaps the group of women Hilma af Klint gathered to have séances with were also buoyed by friendship.

CW Leadbeater, a leading theosophical writer in the early 1900s, and prominent member of the Theosophical society wrote a book about how clairvoyants are able to see beyond what most people perceive. He describes how starting at the level of the atom, matter is surrounded by “planes,” and how these planes overlap each other.

“Every physical atom is floating in an astral sea - a sea of astral matter which surrounds it and fills every interstice in this physical matter. The mental matter in its turn interpenetrates the astral in precisely the same manner; so that all these different realms of nature are not in any way separated in space, but are all existing around us and about us here and now, so that to see them and to investigate them it is not necessary for us to make any movement in space, but only to open within ourselves the senses by means of which they can be perceived.”<sup>40</sup>

He also mentions ether theory, which is a general theory that there is a sort of transmission substance in the physical world through which forces travel. Newton proposed this model in physics, since there was an issue of how light seems to behave as both a particle and a wave, and that if it was a wave then the light would need to be traveling through something, thus a literal substance called “ether” was proposed that surrounded all matter like air.

It’s clear when one reads Leadbeater’s book that he is informed by the theories of what was then modern physics. He talks about how matter can be broken down smaller than an atom, and that the natural end result of that infinite subdivision is an unseen world, which on the level of the subatomic particle is found to be an accurate idea in modern science. By this argument all people have an “astral body”, one that exists on the plane of invisible forces. According to Leadbeater people also have an etheric plane and a mental plane within them. He explains that just as signals travel

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<sup>40</sup> C.W. Leadbeater, *Man Visible and Invisible Examples of Different Types of Men as Seen by Means of Trained Clairvoyance*, The Theosophical Publishing House, 1902, p.19.

through our nervous system, so to do impressions travel through the planes that we exist on.<sup>41</sup>

A clairvoyant is someone that is in tune with this process enough to actually see these vibrations as color surrounding a person, and therefore can interpret their sensations visually. He also explains that it works in the other direction, that a person can use their astral body to experience things.<sup>42</sup>

To an artist, the idea of a physical, visual thought must have been nothing short of an amazing prompt for work. The descriptions of auras are technical and specific, all that's left for the artist to provide is imagination and inspiration. In the hands of a creative intellectual, a legitimized description of something both so visual and mysterious must have seemed like a dazzling opportunity.

Edvard Munch's close friend, Polish writer Stanislaw Przybyszewski had this to say about his work:

“His paintings are virtually chemical preparations of the soul created during the moment when all reason has become silent, when every conceptual process has ceased to operate; preparations of the animalistic reasonless soul as it winds and curls upward in wildest storms, and shrinks in dusk-filled states of retreat, and screams in wild cramps of pain, and howls for hunger.”<sup>43</sup>

This is a beautiful and true statement about Munch's paintings, in my opinion. The book I got this quote from, an accompanying text to a MOMA exhibit, was dismissive of Munch's “chemical preparations,” not mentioning that he had an interest in depicting the soul literally. In Munch's work it is clear that a deeper language of expressing emotions is at play.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

<sup>43</sup> Patricia G. Berman, “Edvard Munch's ‘Modern life of the Soul’”. *Edvard Munch : The Modern Life of the Soul*. Edited by McShine, Kynaston., Berman, Patricia G, Museum of Modern Art, 2006, p. 6.

A big question I've run up against in this process is how to parse out an emotion from something felt in the soul. Today for instance I feel terrible. I'm angry, antisocial, and deeply sad. I'm having deep emotions, but I don't think I am experiencing them on a soul level. When Przybyszewski says that Munch is depicting a soul that "...winds and curls upward in wildest storms, and shrinks in dusk-filled states of retreat, and screams in wild cramps of pain, and howls for hunger." I do not know what the implications of that are. All these artists are painting the "spirit," the "soul," astral projections and such, but is there any unifying viewpoint on what that is? When Munch paints his sadness is he doing the same thing?

Personally, I have never believed in souls. I'm a psychology student, I know that all of my perceptions and emotions and fears are electrical impulses running through my body and brain. I have rationalized the mind-body problem as there being only a body, my mind is a hunk of meat. But at the same time I understand religion. I think I have felt stirred on a level that was not just a rush of dopamine. I have felt a sublime excitement thinking about how life extends from the cell of a plant up through our entire sun-warmed planet. I have been deeply moved hearing about God, and how there is perhaps a force that permeates everything and loves me. In this project I have tried to express the things that affect me on that level, because compared to that my emotions seem like a fast, shallow stream rushing over me, and I'm trying to depict the magma under the stream-bed.

What I feel, is that if I have a soul it exists on a level where there is only whole energy. It's the idea that every event is neutral, and the good or bad judgment comes from our emotions, which I do not think is exactly true (the bombing of Hiroshima for

instance was not a “neutral” event), but I think that my anxiety, for instance, does not exist in my astral body. To quote Bjork, “Emotional landscapes pass over me.”

“Heartsick” the painting that looks like Hal from 2001 a Space Odyssey (unintentional resemblance) is meant to be an image of how I felt after a long romantic relationship ended this past fall. The shape emerging through the field of “drips” is meant to seem like a raw void left after a loved one leaves your life. I used the black and gray to give the painting a muted emotional expression, only disrupted by an angry and passionate red burning around the edges. I think that the emotions surrounding this event were an incredibly introspective experience for me, where I spent a lot of time just feeling, and trying to examine my emotions. I also felt a drive to make these feelings physical, and I got the image for the painting in my head out of nowhere in a moment of sadness. In Thought Forms, red represents both anger and affection, emotions that seem to overlap considerably during a breakup. Grey is depression, black is malice. Perhaps were someone to have seen my aura during my more emotionally fraught days, they would have seen a red glow, muddied by black and grey. In Thought Forms this mixture is labeled “selfish affection”, or in my case loving someone in a way where you do not want them to move on and be happy, you just want them back in your life to ease your own hurt. So the waves of red anger and affection that vibrated through all my planes of existence, up through my mental plane, buzzing in my astral body, was swirled with a dark void form. I was not feeling pure affection or anger, it was mixed with a cloud of depression and the malice.

When interpreted through the lens of a thought form, the image that I came up with makes a lot of sense. The grey drips perhaps represent crying, though may also be

a membrane of depression that blocked me from feeling the true intensity of what was a huge emotional disturbance.

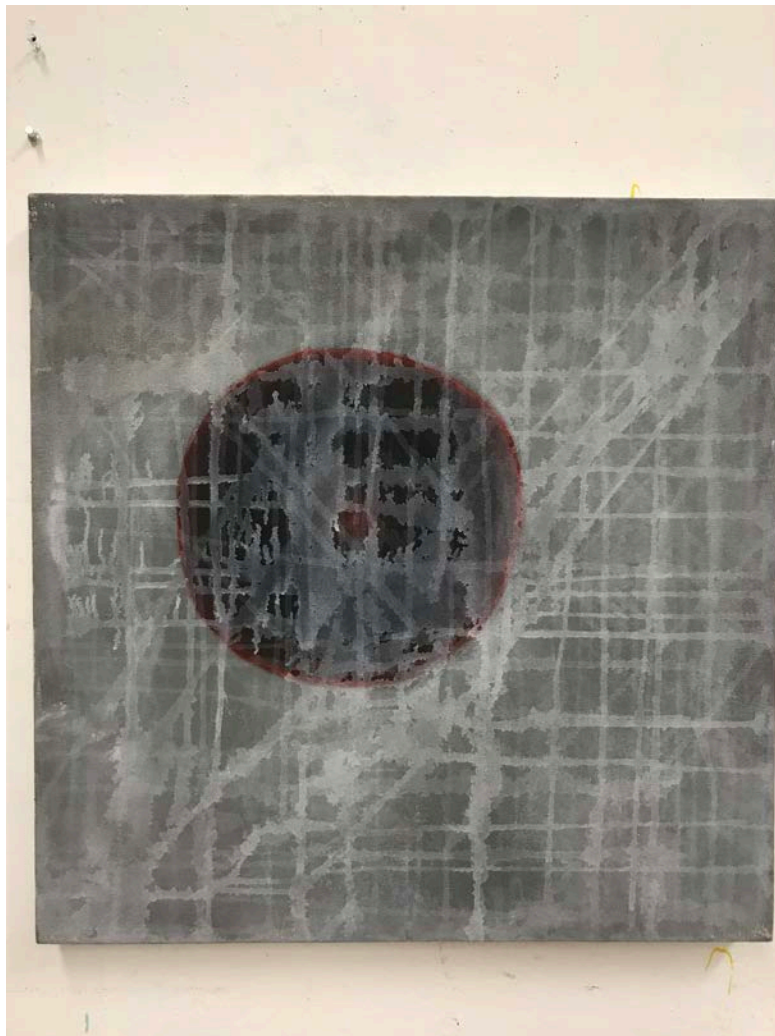


Figure 6: Eden Powell, “Heartsick” Acrylic on Canvas, 2016.

“Self Portrait” was conceived after I reached a place with this project where I was really unsatisfied with what I had been producing. It had become difficult for me to create a system of depicting human experiences. I had tried in “Heartsick,” to give form to an emotional experience, but there was something unsatisfying about this image. I thought that maybe this had to do with the fact that I was trying to follow the ideas laid



down in Thought Forms too literally, and isolating the experience I was trying to depict from the human body. I think shifting towards using an image of the human body to show visible soul experiences is more descriptive and dynamic. This approach was used in the illustrations featured in CW Leadbeater's book Man Visible and Invisible (1902), where he depicts auras as vibrating around a human form.

One night I snuck some butcher paper from the metal studio, laid down on it, and traced my body on it. I felt that it would be a step in the right direction toward addressing the idea of a separate astral body coexisting with a physical body. In this piece I'm trying to paint the joy felt in a moment of high energy. I think a good way to explain this feeling is when you're listening to music and get really wrapped up in it and can feel a lifting feeling. Like you are vibrating on the same level as the music, and as it becomes more intense so does what is going on inside you. This seems like an event or feeling that happens perhaps on an astral level, it's a sensation of a peak or height of experience that feels vibrational. I'm interested in the imagery related to there being an unseen spirit body coexisting with my physical body, and that the invisible body would be able to be excited or invigorated.

A critique I received of this piece from my thesis advisor was that it looks a little too "spot on," meaning that it seems to be obviously influenced by a certain aesthetic corresponding to modern new age culture. For instance, if I were to google "new age," or "metaphysics," images of human forms surrounded by light come up. Perhaps I should submit this work to a contemporary metaphysical magazine and see if it makes the cover?

I liked this stage of the piece though. The people illustrating the magazines that you find at the health food store are drawing these images of glowing beings ascending to a higher plane because that is a pretty intuitive response to reading occult science literature. The description of the soul in much of this literature is that of a spiritual body that overlays the visual physical body, and is made of a different sort of substance (descriptions of this matter are available in Occult Chemistry by Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, a very dense text about the subatomic structure of the astral body). So to imagine that one has a separate layer that is more connected to the wider universe leads one to think about intense color surrounding one's body. The idea of the aura is also very prevalent in our culture, and there are certainly images that this word brings to mind.

I grew up in Eugene among the hippies, so this spiritual imagery is absolutely something that I've seen a lot of in my life, and I'm not surprised at all that this piece seemed reminiscent of that visual paradigm, because I'm sure that I'm influenced by it. I think an important part of this whole process for me is to approach the metaphysical from a place that accepts that all the yuppie, appropriative, and commercial spirituality I grew up with is a direct bastardization of the theosophical movement. What I want my readers and viewers to understand is that I am actually talking about the auras and astral bodies they have heard of, it's just that I'm engaging with this topic from writings that pre-date the new age movement of the 1960s and 1970s and trying to use that knowledge to make my own work. That said, I am reading these texts as a white American from a post new age viewpoint, and that colors my thinking a lot.

Another thing I have thought about throughout this process is cultural appropriation and how theosophy stands in relation to Hinduism. It seems that Madame Blavatsky borrowed broadly from Hinduism in her writings, which was based on her extensive travel and study throughout India. She may have synthesized and reduced Hindu ideas to the point where to compare theosophy to Hinduism is a discredit to Hinduism, which of course is so much more ancient and immensely nuanced. Merwin-Marie Snell wrote a short article in 1895 about exactly what Blavatsky was borrowing from Hinduism and Buddhism for her philosophy, and it seems like he concluded that she borrowed much more from Hinduism than Buddhism, and within Hinduism she identifies mostly with a few specific schools of thought. He also states that the philosophy is predominantly owed to Blavatsky's "...personal speculations and synthetic thought."<sup>44</sup>

I have not studied Hinduism hardly at all for this project, which may have been a huge and meaningful oversight. My reasoning for not doing so has a few points. Firstly I do not readily have a good source of teaching on this topic, and I think that attempting to grasp it on my own from books in my limited time frame would probably leave me worse off in terms of representing Hinduism fairly. Secondly, from what I have read the artists I'm studying were largely influenced by Annie Besant, CW Leadbeater, Madame Blavatsky, and Rudolf Steiner (who was very influenced by Goethe). All of these are European writers who seem to use their own clairvoyance and critical thinking more heavily than specific religious teachings. Theosophy is at its core non-denominational,

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<sup>44</sup> Merwin-Marie Snell, "Modern Theosophy in Its Relation to Hinduism and Buddhism. II." *The Biblical World*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1895, pp. 259–265., [www.jstor.org/stable/3135158](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3135158), p. 265.

and these writers appear to be more concerned with their own ideas based on larger principals about the universe and the non-physical world. With that said however, they use Blavatsky's core ideas, which she gleaned from Hinduism.

As I worked on this painting and this paper, I became really enamored with Lyonel Feininger's images of churches, and wanted to try to paint one of those, so I just did it on top of the figure I had done. The Arts and Their Mission has a really interesting passage about how in more ancient times people built churches and tombs as houses for the spirit, so besides the purpose of architecture being to literally house people, it is to provide structures that the soul-body can interact with as it leaves the body.



Figure 7. Edén Powell, “Self Portrait I”, Acrylic on Canvas, 2016.

After I began realizing the links between theosophy and Nazism, I became very emotional and mad at myself for not researching well enough over the course of this project. I felt like I did not know what I was talking about, and that made me embarrassed to even be depicting auras and chakras or anything religious and spiritual on what I felt to be a surface level. During my period of frustration, I was reading a few books about Malevich, and I think reading about his take on abstraction really helped me out of beating myself up too bad. I think his philosophy takes what I wanted from

theosophy, which is a deeper meaning behind art and making images, and separates it out from the heavy implications of prescribing an explanation for the entirety of the human experience. It was a grave mistake on my part to try to make art based on a philosophy that tries to explain the whole universe. I think it assumes a wisdom on my part that I do not have.

So to fix this painting I thought about what I really wanted to say with this work. I wanted to make a painting about a pure sensation of joy that occurs in my body, perhaps the joy that comes from being alive. The mystery that I think metaphysics tries to solve sometimes is how our feelings as humans seem so significant, but that it's odd to look yourself in the eye and know that everything that is you is contained in matter. So the white, eye-level square is supposed to be representative of a person's head. The dynamic relationship of the square to the black background is that it is at eye-level with the viewer.



Figure 8: Eden Powell, “Self Portrait II”, Acrylic on Canvas, 2017. The black paint was not dry enough at the time of the photograph to paint the white square, so I taped a piece of paper to the canvas.

“Sunshine” was based almost exclusively off of a really great walk I took at the beginning of winter break. It was a sunny winter day and I was listening to music as I walked around my neighborhood. I was in a good mood so I tried to think of something related to my thesis to work on. I got this image in my head of my how my spirit might look at that moment, and started imagining it rising inside of me and interacting with

the green winter sunlight filtering down on me. It seemed to be in delighted, vigorous movement.

This was at a time where I was trying to isolate what I felt that I could call spiritual experiences, instead of emotions or moods. Moments that if I believed I had a spirit would be identified as spiritual, or moving to me in that way. This was a moment that broke through, and I thought I could depict it visually. I do not want to glorify my process, but this brings to mind for me how Kupka used to stand naked in his garden every morning and take air baths. Sometimes being outside in the sun seems to bring out something basic and wonderful in the human mind and body.

I was able to do a good sketch immediately of what I wanted, so I casually transferred that sketch onto a canvas that I had, and worked on the piece over winter break in my home. I used an odd method making this painting in that I carefully painted in the pencil outlines that I made and chose the colors as I went. I then went over the lines with a pencil to make them darker. I think that this piece is more of a drawing than a painting.





Figure 9: Eden Powell, “Sunshine”, Acrylic on canvas, Eden Powell, 2016.

My piece “Death” was based on an assignment I got in a painting class this year, where we were supposed to paint something based off of a passage from a book. I chose to base my painting off of a large portion of Rudolf Steiner’s book Outline of Occult Science, where he describes in deep detail the process of how the parts of the soul separate upon death, and how these parts stretch apart slightly as a person is asleep. He talks a lot about how the physical body is just a shell for the spirit, which cannot survive

on the physical earth without the human body. The physical body is like a connection point between the whole spiritual universe, and the whole physical universe. He describes the soul as a drop in a whole ocean, with this ocean existing separately and parallel to the physical world. Upon death, the soul no longer is linked to the physical world, so it goes back to the spiritual sea. When a person is asleep, their astral (soul) body partially rejoins the spiritual universe while the physical body is incapacitated.

As I was reading, this idea that physical form conceals and interacts with the spirit really captured my imagination. I liked the image of death being a moment of transformation, and sort of a triumphant parting from the physical body. I wanted to convey a sense of movement and hidden forces becoming visual.

The skull I integrated is an obvious symbol of death, for instance the “death” tarot card always has a skeleton on it. That tarot card is meant to connote cycles and new beginnings as well as endings, which is very referential to reincarnation. The skull is a reminder to humans that their physical form will end, and one day the face they see in the mirror will only be bone. Spooky! But also without the death of the physical form the spirit could not rejoin the plane of the non-physical and start over. I was not really focusing on reincarnation for the painting. Instead I was thinking about the moment of separation when the body stops being a container and the spirit leaves it.

I wanted to explore the aesthetics I used in “Sunshine,” because I think the process of generating a strong pencil sketch, and then filling it in with colors in the moment based on the color relationships I developed as I went yielded a good result. This process didn’t actually work as well for this painting and at certain stages it looked like a paint by numbers exercise. I think for the first few weeks that I worked on it I was

clinging too hard to the original drawing that I made for it, instead of painting in a way that used the paint to aid the composition. Sometimes it seems to be counterproductive to use pencil to define the composition of a painting, because the finished painting needs to make cohesive sense in paint, not in pencil.

The colors I used changed a lot as I worked on it. Initially it was much more colorful, with the palette simplifying over time. The colors do not have specific symbolic meaning, but the red and yellow should convey fire or a similar passionate quality, and the more bodily natural colors are meant to loosely convey flesh.

After getting a bad start with this painting it was really hard to fix the composition so that it looked like one whole image, instead of awkward and fragmented. The process became a struggle of looking at the painting for long stretches of time, trying to figure out what I could change to make it look right, like solving a puzzle. Lots of things were moved and changed colors throughout the process of making this painting.

When it was critiqued in my painting class during spring term it was still not quite complete, which the other students immediately picked up on. The students also readily identified it as being about death, probably mostly because of the skull.



Figure 10: "Death", Eden Powell, 2017.

"Sunset," is my own take on painting a sunset. I am truly enamored with red circles, a love affair that began with "The Banquet" by Rene Magritte a few years ago. The red circles that inhabit my imagination are the sun that you stare at without burning your eyes, that you look at with your brain instead of your retinas, while feeling your skin warm.

Before doing this painting, my friends and I went to Nye Beach and saw a great sunset over the ocean. I was standing in the water, just basking in the color, and I started thinking about how I look at sunsets as a flat backdrop, probably because of my constant exposure to screens and images. When I saw the sunset over the ocean I saw the curvature of the earth and the sun as it exists in outer space, and how I was able to see out over the ocean, out over the curve of the planet, at the sun.



Figure 11: “Sunset”, Eden Powell, 2017.

“Dreams” is a more playful piece that serves as an illustration of sorts for the part of Outline of Occult Science that describes dreams. In this part of the book Rudolf Steiner writes about how dreams are the perceptions of the physical world that the soul

experiences through the ego when the physical body is asleep. The ego is sort of like the life-force of specific people, and it is described as an intermediary between the soul and the body.<sup>45</sup> I just painted a pleasant depiction of myself and a friend sleeping and having our dream bodies meet each other.



Figure 12: “Dreams”, Oil on Canvas, Eden Powell, 2017.

## Conclusion

I do not really know where the spiritual is in contemporary art. At 80WSE Gallery at New York University a little over a year ago there was an exhibition called “Language of the Birds: Occult and Art” that displayed artist who were engaging directly with the occult. A lot of these artists seemed to be using magical symbols and trying to evoke images from witchcraft, with a few engaging more with theosophical

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<sup>45</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *An Outline of Occult Science*. Translated by Maud and Henry B Monges. Anthroposophic Press, Inc., 1972, p. 61.

images. Not a lot of pure abstraction though, instead there seemed to be an emphasis on magic and symbols.

Chris Martin wrote in his article “Buddhism, Landscape, and the Absolute Truth about Abstract Painting”:

“Abstract painting will not save the world. The time when abstract painting led the avant garde and provoked shock and outrage is a poignant memory now. Abstract painting plays a miniscule part in a culture saturated with movies, video games, giant photographs, endless newspapers, glossy magazines, and television—everywhere television.”<sup>46</sup>

Abstract art seems so buried in history in a way. The artists I discussed do have an element of wanting to save the world. Artists have to do different things now to provoke outrage and shake their viewer.

I do not think the project I did was a wise or successful one, I think at the end of it I do agree with Kandinsky, that to ape the work of another age leads to stillborn results. But I also think that for me it was irresistible, because part of who I am as a painter is someone who is really spoken to by early abstraction. I think it was a natural inclination on my part to explore ideas that interact with paintings that I really love. I do not think I was able to make any cutting-edge work, or have any ideas that seem like a stepping stone, because I can only look back on the ideas of philosophy and early science, I cannot experience them as they emerge. I cannot meet with other artists to discuss the ideas I have read about because they are antiquated, they do not have the pressing quality that they once did. There are monumental, fabulous ideas in emerging science, but they do not seem to have the quality of describing an unseen world in the same way as the ideas at the beginning of the twentieth century did. Scientific strides do

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<sup>46</sup> Chris Martin, “Buddhism, Landscape, and the Absolute Truth about Abstract Painting”, The Brooklyn Rail, 2005, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2005/04/art/buddhism-landscape-and-the-absolute-trut>.

not make me as uncomfortable as I'm sure early physics or the invention of x-rays and the microscope once made people. I read about amazing advances and new studies on my Facebook feed, not through books and lectures. Maybe that makes it harder for science to shake me.

The spiritual seems hidden in society in some ways. Religion is not the core of communities, many people are atheists. Eastern spirituality has been appropriated by Western civilization to the point that people do yoga for exercise, and prayer flags adorn dorm rooms. We are suspicious of Eastern thought because of how it is filtered back to us in the Western world.

Donald Kuspitt wrote an essay called Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art, where he cites the difference between current abstraction and the initial abstraction as being that it is not an urgent effort anymore. Abstraction needed to be invented by pioneers, and now that it has been invented we use these modes as just another moment of communication. It is not so much a necessary experiment today.

“Is no longer understood as a mythical inner construction transmitting inner meanings through the “quality of the whole” available only when the “proper set of mind and feeling towards it” have been achieved. The abstract work of art has become another reproducible communication.”<sup>47</sup>

So what could I ever accomplish as an abstract painter? Do I need to have new spiritual insights instead of borrowing other people's? Does my work need to become a transcendental object? I think it's clear that abstract art that is only used as communication is not meaningful in the same way as abstract art was when it was invented, when the work more resembled a discovery.

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<sup>47</sup> Donald Kuspitt, “Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art.” *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, Edited by Maurice Tuchman, Abbeville Press Publishers, 1986, p. 313.



I would personally like to keep painting with this in mind. What if there was a second period of invention where artists were not afraid of engaging the unseen on a personal level? I did not discover how to do this over the course of this project. I did not transcend. I did not find a way for modern abstract artists to pick up the spiritual momentum.

Did the artists I've written about answer all the questions that they set out to? No, but one hundred years later I cannot answer these questions in the same way.

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