

BEING MADE AND MAKING
IN THE RUACH OF GOD

By

Marshall Roemen

A TERMINAL PROJECT REPORT

Presented to the Department of Art
of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

June 11th, 2005

*If he should take back his spirit (ruach) to himself,
and gather to himself his breath
all flesh would perish together,
and man would return to dust.*

Job 34:14

In the past two years working toward a terminal project, one word has come to mean more than any other concept in its significance and application to my work. The Hebrew word "ruach", understood most notably as the wind, breath, and spirit that enable and empower all life, conveys a very basic concept in the Bible: humanity's utter dependence upon the unseen. The ruach of God—the moving wind that animates and is expressed in all of creation—is more than a sharing or imparting of breath and spirit. It is a living aspect of the infinite inhabiting the finite. As an agent of change, the ruach given to individuals can best be understood as a provision from the life of God. It is the presence said to have "hovered over the face of the waters" at the creation of the world, and over time it has taken a vital presence in the theory and practice of my work.

In my three years at the University of Oregon, this concept of provision and power from an external source—as evidenced through one's own bodily respiration and revitalization—inspired my work long before I landed on the word ruach. I have activated lung-like bags using fans initiated by the power of the viewer. I have moved my hand across calligraphic paintings, hovering over the surface in dynamic relationship to what is "good" and what I wish to change. I have recounted the number of human heartbeats in an hour or day, quantifying provision in the taking of a pulse. I have drawn the figure as though drawing a ghost, rendering it with dust to bring life and form. Although many of these activities sought to de-emphasize notions of independence, self-sufficiency, and permanence, others have celebrated the creative free will granted to me as an artist. While the variety of these activities once seemed separate to me, they all seemed enveloped within the larger notion of God's ruach as both a cause and effect in beautiful things. These concepts collectively formulate my past and present position as one who is *being made and making*. I am a dual citizen.

This concept has not always run through me as it does now. I can almost remember the day I realized I did not make myself. I was astounded to see my own composition as a design I did not author. I had not chosen everything about myself; in fact I had not chosen anything. Looking at my hands, it was clear to me that my body, my face, my name, and my family... none of these were my decisions. At a young age, one begins to look at these things and the world around them in order to gain some sense of self-comprehension. Although I have occasionally questioned the premise of an original Creator, I cannot presently fathom walking outdoors only to conclude that this world has no author. Such reasoning seems as viable as walking into an art show, only to conclude that the work created itself. The ridiculousness of this proposition has led me time and again to seek my own origins and purposes. As an author of artworks, ideas, and visual experiences, my understanding of self remains first as a creation and second as a creator.

...

My MFA experiences of making artwork have changed the way I think about "being made". The biggest shift in my thinking came by relinquishing representational subject matter, and the impulse to replicate only what I see. When I allowed myself a completely free-form inventive language of paint, what an opportunity it was to create new worlds! A family of abstractions that began as experiments years ago have given birth to new approaches to painting.

Through these experiments, then, a gradual shift in my understanding of God took place: from a Creator who prescribes forms from ideas, to a Creator whose activities involve exploration, enjoyment, responsiveness, and even surprise in the act of making, (to say nothing of the disappointment that also comes to all creators). In a systematic approach to art-making, one discovers uniqueness and originality only to the degree which the system allows it. As Stephen Wolfram suggests in *A New Kind of Science*, God might have begun the universe as a simple computer program using the equivalent of four lines of code to generate millennia of unfolding complexity. All that God needed to do was hit "go".

If there is a mechanistic and impersonal programmer behind all of this, how does that change my work? Why do people desire to think of themselves as important and unique? Whether uniqueness is important or not, some questions surrounding any creation remain constant for me. Why does creation happen, and how is it necessary? These questions pervade artistic creative practice, and they continue to shape my decisions in both referential and non-referential paintings.

Being made and making encompasses both a receiving and a giving. Though this may be inherent in all artistic practice, I have sought specifically to make work with the realization that I have a reason for being and doing art, and that that reason can be believed, even if never verified. If meaning is derived from an exchange between myself and my maker, then I find a need for a daily communication with the Artist whose breath sustains and enlivens me at every moment. Without this breath, I am incapable of any action on my own.

While it is not verifiable through any empirical evidence, my experience of the living breath of God has been undeniable over the past three years of experimental work and exhibitions. In terms of provision, direction, revitalization, and clarity, I have gradually come to trust the infinite capacity of God to work through any difficult circumstance. Repeatedly I have entered places of desperation as ideas struggle to take shape beyond mere dust. While I've questioned my own sanity at times, the process of following a mind greater than my own has taught me the implausibility of knowing what is ahead, as well as the incredible vitality of what is born out of long and intense labor pains. Letting go of the control I once held in my art has been a learning process, but I try to welcome this departure every time I'm in the studio. The single most memorable aspect of my experience in graduate school will not be the works themselves, but the collective surrender they represent to an Artist whose process I cannot control, and whose work never fails to amaze me in due time.

C.S. Lewis describes mysticism of every sort as the "temporary shattering of ordinary spatial and temporary consciousness and of our discursive intellect." "If at times I've felt crazy, I am hopeful in remembering that I should not judge my current position any further than I should judge an infinite, all-knowing God. When I think of trust, I think of the classic picture of a person falling backward from a platform where another person waits to catch them. I imagine watching this event from an outside perspective, perhaps God's perspective, and finding it absolutely beautiful. I have come to the place where I think the most beautiful things about this world involve just such a relationship.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean on your own understanding,

In all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your paths.

Trust does not happen at the same time between two people. A person must risk a part of themselves in order to test another person's reliability. Whether falling backward or running ahead, one moves in risk and vulnerability toward an unseen outcome. Trust is a giving up of safety, a relinquishing of power, a release of control. These things were a regular part of working in my studio this year. Trust has become the most beautiful posture I can assume.

There is simplicity in doing what you are asked to do, but the numerous questions are not always answered. They don't need to be. Having one's path directed does not insure immediate happiness, and there is an uncomfortable feeling with every increase of trust. With every public show I have had in graduate school, save for one, I have sought with everything I have to entrust my endeavors completely to my maker. In listening and waiting for the directional breath of God, one wonders whether they have become inflated by their own illusions. One wonders if their pursuits will leave them wilting before a mirage. But this practice of seeking and listening beyond disappointment has become the part of art-making I love and fear most. Depending on God for direction can easily turn one from trust to distrust, patience to anger, and excitement to discouragement. It is within these activities that my thesis work took shape. As pieces born in trust, they carry the most rewarding sensations of *being made and making*.

Following this trajectory in my final year of work, I found my usual difficulties increase in proportion with the pieces I attempted. At the time of my thesis proposal, my ideas about dependence focused on the necessity of breathing—an exchange between the self and otherness. In a painting-based installation *Ruach*, (fig. 1, not to be confused with the diptych painting *Ruach* shown in the museum), I sought to evoke a sense of the caressing nature of air and breath around a figure—qualities of ruach that speak of the delicacy and fragility of everyday human sustenance. In direct opposition to the heavy, dark colors of previous painting-based installations, where the intensity of marks referenced the pulsing and beating and streaming of the cardiovascular system (fig. 2), I focused my color primarily around the whites and soft grays that would speak more about an outdoor atmosphere and expansion of light and air.

This shift toward whites, tinted colors, and light grey washes of paint seemed to welcome the use of a material I had previously never used: silver leaf. As a medium, silver lent itself to the soft palette as

well as the play of light from angled surfaces. Beginning with silverpoint drawing, I soon took to silver leaf as a medium with a history of associations surrounding preciousness, material value, reflection, and light. By addressing the small room's walls and floor with touches of silver leaf, the space and light played an important sculptural role aside from the images depicted.

In both of the above painting-based installations, the unconventional placement of traditional rectangular canvases competed with the images painted on them. Wrestling two-dimensional work from the rectangle has proven to be a difficult task, and I continue to seek approaches to painting that involve the floor and the ceiling as locations for two-dimensional work. This struggle has produced some important stepping-stones in my thorough experimentations of painting in graduate school.

The installation *Ruach* did not communicate the drowning narrative that it referenced for me, but I am more interested in the variety of readings that opened up in the piece. Through the course of three years exhibiting work, I found myself consistently rearranging paintings as they make their way into a gallery space, forming new contexts for them through new configurations. Every show brought a new way of dealing with rectangular paintings as objects, and often times I took to the walls as the most intriguing surfaces I might engage. A few exhibitions found a place between abstraction, figuration, and installation in the very act of arrangement within the gallery. These painting-based installations begin to sink or swim as I navigate the waters where abstraction, representation, and installation intersect. Like fresh water and salt water, I delve into these various waters as separate places, but I come up in unknown locations where their forces collide. Trying to stay afloat in the middle of these twisted currents is difficult but interesting. I continue to swim and find life in the struggle, even though these waters have drowned me on several occasions.

...

Presented with the chance to do large-scale works for the expansive space of the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, I was inclined to build upon some smaller works on paper, both representational and non-, jumping from an eight-inch scale to a twelve-foot scale. The most exhilarating experiences I have had with art always involved a scale that exceeds my bodily presence and reach. Although large work is not inherently interesting, it carries for me an excitement of perception, and it is experienced first and foremost as a shift in scale from the human body. As an artist, there has simply been an undying interest to work in

this mode when the occasion becomes available. This period of my life proved to be a perfect opportunity to devote myself to some very large surfaces.

The pieces I produced for the MFA thesis, *Predicament* and *Ruach*, touch on the above concepts of being made and making (respectively), although neither piece should completely lay claim to one idea or the other. Both pieces were born out of a fascination with the nature of bodily presence within a greater unseen, interwoven fabric of air all around us. To work on a grand scale was to visually expand these thoughts onto surfaces and behold a reality beyond myself and my own scope, reach, and vision. The pieces were only possible through a kind of trust, and I see them now more as a viewer than as the originator.

In the painted work *Predicament* (fig. 3), I began by turning back to the idea of reflecting on oneself in a space of unknown dimensions—this is my meditation on the basic question of what to do with the realization that we exist in a world we did not author. As in the act of respiration, when the distinction between oneself and the air around them dissolves, or as in a reflection of certain metals, when reflections elegantly blur to form a single interwoven surface, I wanted to arrive at a figure obscured by the haziness of light and space around them. In posing a figure as a provocation rather than an overt question or answer, I hoped to implicate the viewer's mind by focusing on the gaze of the central figure. What might she be looking at if her identity is not the subject? What is her predicament? The work was about a kind of confrontation, yes, but not as a threat or assumption about the viewer. If the human conscience is not the end of the line, nor the beginning, I wanted to weave a figure into that fabric of mystery and the wealth of unknowns floating around a curious mind. The human being arrives at our "knowns" somehow, and they are all dependent to some degree on phenomenon—the way we experience things—which requires a pure and simple form of belief. We believe things are true; we do not know they are true without some form of belief.

If the self is an inescapable filter, each one of us can never know with absolute assurance what lies beyond our own perception and experience. Through language we establish points of agreement and difference, delineate truth, and function as social beings.

Tim Hawkinson

As indications of my world, and as devices of pure interest and intrigue, the primary elements of *Predicament* stem from objects in and around my space, including the model who is my youngest sister. These familial elements combine to evoke possible narratives, narratives that are conjured up differently by each viewer based on their perceptions of the painting. My own associations with *Predicament* have to do with privilege—the privileges afforded to this figure begin not just with food or clothing, which are both hinted at in the painting, but the very air and light that sustain our presence. These privileges are a reflection of my life thus far, and for me they bring feelings ranging from guilt to gratitude, two things that are worn on my face at any given moment of self-reflection.

There is a guilt that goes along with my own self-reflecting day to day, but a gratitude for what I continue to receive every day. These are my hands, this is my name, this is my family... and while I did not choose them, I must say thank you to the author who gave them to me. What I do as a being in the world is my responsibility, but this responsibility can be shared and in fact can be directed, and this direction is what I seek. The intentions of this kind of painterly construction are not to ask anyone to do something. If the viewer is able to look at this girl and see a truth to the moment, then they have created the meaning of the piece. If no such resonance is experienced, then I have not taken anything away from the viewer. Is this work useful in the world? I answer that question with absolute peace about the opportunity I have to love life through painting, to give myself to my work and subsequently to people, and to cultivate and steward the parts of this world that have been entrusted to me. The boundaries of my responsibilities, like breath, can be shallow or deep, depending on what I choose to take in and give out.

The kind of labor involved in this painting has an open-ended quality in its depiction. As in Giacometti's numerous central figure drawings, I am interested in putting down true moments of observation. I seek essentials rather than details, and I do not wish to smooth over any form. In my paintings based in perception and representation, I rarely find the grounds to completely render every inch of a space, because I want to be able to breathe. I hoped *Predicament* could live in a place that allows the viewer to breathe with it somehow, even if the air is thick and dense. If I could make the viewer feel like their own individual experience mattered, I would've done a good job. But as Jenny Saville did in her six-painting monumental exhibition at Gagosian in 1999, I was more interested in taking the paintings to a

level of overwhelming presence than I was in tapping the viewer on the shoulder to experience the work. I am interested in what lies beyond each of our mind/body systems, and what extends beyond our own ability to comprehend our world. The uncertainty of this painting's subject is perhaps its downfall, perhaps its strength.

The figure was worked into the painting many times over the course of the term. I hit dead ends on several occasions, wondering why the work I poured myself into had to be such an antiquated form of painting. One imposition after the next seemed to push it away from the contemporary world of description back to the early renaissance or baroque periods. The fight for this painting was as difficult as any course I've ever set foot on. There were several nights I felt I was losing my connection with the God I hoped to follow. I looked frantically for better solutions to this enormous dark plane of reflective material and paint, charcoal and tears. But the work was steeped from the beginning in a process of trust, and following that pathway helped me get past the impossibility of the light in the painting.

Predicament hangs precariously wherever it is, and it will do so as long as it remains an overwhelming of my own inability. When a piece begins and ends as the same idea, it has been stifled, and I did not begin this piece with a mental image of what is now the painting. *Predicament* rests squarely at the crossroads of intuition, conception, direction, and uncertainty. The responsibility and weight of the major parts changed as the painting developed, so that at different points the center, the periphery, or the space between was the most pronounced element. The scale of the project also created a tendency for different media to separate out and resist integration. The sense of conflated languages of description was at certain points unbearable to look at, yet I continued to introduce new media and broader color as the work asked for it. Of the charcoal, paint, and silver leaf, the silver leaf provided the greatest sense of reward as it became integrated within the light of the painting.

In both paintings *Predicament* and *Ruach* (fig. 4), the use of silver leaf brought associations of value, delicacy, and reflection for me. In the first place, silver leaf is attractive for its variety of coloration from tarnish black to gleaming silver. Light is absorbed and reflected within it, and thus it falls in and out of presence before the viewer. Depending on the light in a room the reflective properties will, as in *Predicament*, read as paint emitting the illusion of light. In actuality, the silver leaf is providing a great deal of the light to become active and not merely black vacuous space. When the lights are turned off, to a

degree the painting turns off. This was incredibly beneficial and accidental in the making of *Predicament*, but *Ruach* also brought new understandings of the potential for silver leaf, which I intend to explore in many works to come.

The tarnishing effect of silver is also intriguing to me. As a valuable material that loses its luster over time, the tarnish of silver relates to aging and the human body's changing appearance over time. It was important for me to begin with materials that brought in some kind of preciousness and value. In *Ruach* it was not only the silver leaf, but the use of a very expensive cobalt pigment that engaged me in a careful application of paint. The application of silver leaf, ironically, is not treated as precious. In both paintings, the silver leaf appears as a very immediate addition to the periphery of paintings. Unlike eastern or western miniature painting, the metal leaf is not manipulated greatly to enhance particular forms. It is rather placed simply upon the surface, conveying an abandonment of preciousness and an embrace of the raw beauty of the materials. This rawness is carried further back into the surfaces themselves, where the linen is exposed throughout much of the diptych.

The third and most enjoyable feature about silver leaf is its incredible delicacy when holding it. Before it is adhered to a surface, it speaks of breath more than any material I've used. To lift each square from its packaging is an incredibly nuanced experience. To carry a palm-sized square of silver leaf across any distance, one feels clumsy, in awe, appreciative, cautious, and graced all at the same time. As the material approaches the surface to be adhered to, the initial place it touches the glue is the final placement it must take. This material demands the full attention of its user, yet it can be allowed to have a life of its own. Throughout several pieces during my thesis year of work, I found great beauty in the way a mistake or a lack of control gave rise to many beautiful cracks and fissures within the silver. As a small story of creation, it reminds me that a maker can locate more beauty in the surprises of the moment than in the original intentions. The combination of preconception and discovery produces a result beyond mere ideas, which is the process of *being made and making*.

The paintings I've done for this exhibition were indeed experimental in their enormity and duration of layering. In the diptych *Ruach*, I am sure of a few of my intentions, and those were less conscious than I may now say. What is certain about the pieces is this: an infinitely complex world of associations is available to the artist at any time. As a painter, I found a deep sense of enjoyment, freedom,

and wonder in committing my attention to my own, albeit limited, universe of applications and processes of paint. From the initial process driven marks that sweep across the surface like a gigantic charcoal rubbings, windshield wipers or snow angel wings, to the inserted fragments of fractured calligraphy such as the Reese's logo fragments, decorative twists spotted with silver leaf, or hints of Coca-Cola swirls—the implosion or explosion from the center has entertained associations with phenomena such as a sunburst, an atom, a cross-section of a vein, a butterfly, a whirlwind, and a pond. The distance between surface flotsam and the pool of organic passages of paint beneath is limited by the reduction of color and contrast, but also by the layering of color. Most of the color resists a submersion or recession into the underlying grayish tones. The blocks of large color are less infused with the rotational mass at the center, although some areas of color drop back and some pull forward. The silver leaf particles were a further attempt to keep the eye dipping into and skimming across ever-changing thresholds of surface. As the piece moved from the studio to the museum, the angle at which the light reflected back at the viewer, especially along the silver leafed bands running vertically on both sections, emphasized the ornamental, tapestry-like qualities of the piece. The images within them became subverted by the presentation of them as objects. This was initiated by the floatation of the pieces away from the wall, allowing them to curl and warp and become sculptural to a large extent.

Nothing that is True is new, and nothing that is new is True.

Within the painted language of *Ruach*, the notion of creating a world of completely unique, non-referential marks was both intriguing and impossible. As in a Rorschach ink-blot image, the shapes created through my process of paint application would invariably be associated with the outside world. As a maker, I find a sadness in my inability to create something truly new, and my inability to detach myself from the parameters of the time-space continuum within which I live. Conversely, as a creation, I find a beauty in the physical and mental limitations I embody. In this painting I sought a reality that is external to myself, greater than myself, and indicative of the vitality that connects my own temporal state to an infinite dimension. The inexpressibility of my experience of divine ruach is the genesis of this visual expansion of forms. In a formal description of this painting, the term "abstraction" seems problematic and limited. I was

not interested in abstracting a natural phenomenon such as wind, breath, storm, or sea, but rather in imagining some kind of supernatural space of pulsating life.

In *Ruach* I sought a hybridized articulation of the world I see and the reality I do not see, and thus I have included elements from the world around me. Most all of the textual elements are fragmented and partial, incapable of communicating any message beyond their own phonetically incomplete utterances. If the textual fragments convey a silence about their world, there remains one small key that allows for a kind of anthropological decoding. In the left panel of the diptych, roughly one third the way up from the bottom of the piece, one may find a Reese's candy logo rendered calmly, quietly upside down. This cultural symbol is decidedly unspiritual and mundane, yet within my own locus of contemporary referents it is a spark that ignites many things. For me it refers to my own quirky tastes, but also highlights the strange conjunction I find today between culture and nature, and the way some forms of societal development are not designed to reinforce nature in any way. While I do not intend to overtly reference major issues like consumption, production, or excessive use of resources, I am constantly aware of the explosion of designed graphic packaging and the familiarity we have with it, almost like a new form of dust in the world. The way such fragments disconnect from the organic world and the human body is fascinating to me. From the swarm of products and marketable tasty tidbits comes the layering of garbage across an entire bay, whether visible at the surface or sunken below. I continue to buy Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, but I am dismayed that I am more familiar with their trademarked logo than I am with my own eleven human body systems.

Orchestrating these pieces together and working on them side by side allowed for a dialogue that continues to unfold. In their installation across from one another, one becomes most aware of their similarities in size and composition. As large as they are, the pieces have managed to receive attributes not simply of immensity, but of femininity, which is a welcomed connection to the nature of the ruach of God. Both paintings were worked up in a consciousness of the feminine personages of God as presented in the Bible. By avoiding the predominantly male imagery of the God of the Bible, I chose to emphasize the beautiful caress and simultaneous strength brought to humanity by the ruach of God, which in the Hebrew is feminine.

The second impression that I have gathered from a handful of people is the way in which the two

central compositions operate inversely from each other. The central focus of *Predicament* is more often described as a gathering toward the center figure's gaze. From the portrayal of the female's gaze, the eye is not led out to the rest of the piece, but across the room to the other wall. The composition in *Ruach* is then described as an explosion or expansion, leading the eye outward from the center to the periphery of the painting, which implies an even larger space beyond its own edges. As a picture of the gathering, propulsion, and expansion of breath from outside the body, through the head, into the expanding lungs, this cyclical procedure of viewing the installation *Being Made and Making in the Ruach of God*, beginning with *Predicament* and ending with *Ruach*, becomes as rich as any other potential experience of the interaction between the two paintings. While it is impossible to expect this progression of the eye and mind from any one viewer, the lessons an artist learns from an experience like this are always building blocks toward a more complex, better orchestration of the elements. An great example of a similar directional movement can be seen in Mel Chin's installation *Render*, which begins with the viewer's recognition of a portrait, and ends behind the viewer in a literal explosion of fragments across a gallery wall.

It's not what you do that makes up who you are. It's who you are that makes up what you do.

In conclusion, letting go of the control I once held in my art has been a learning process, but departing from the prescriptions I once held has opened up a number of pathways in my work. As scattered as my experiments and material investigations have been over three years, I have gained an absolute confidence not in myself alone, but in the infinite working through the finite. As a criteria for judgment about the work I've done for my MFA thesis, I find room for deep improvement as well as tremendous satisfaction. The pieces as they are shown represent a paradox to me of an absolute emptying of myself, a fulfilling of the things asked of me, a desire to fulfill my own interests, and a reflection of things I would not and could not do again. It is clear to me how they reflect the environment that produced them, and just like a plant that grows and takes shape around a number of different obstacles, there is a beauty in the uniqueness of that kind of growing.

It is difficult to say whether my concept of being made or of making underwent a deeper transformation, but through the making of this work I am led to one particular question that opens new

depths in my understanding of my maker. If God's attributes of *maker* have been clearly extrapolated, from Michelangelo's ceiling to the myriad of theories about origins of the universe, I must ask myself: how is God also one who is *being made*? My answer is spelled out across the walls of my studio. For in every endeavor to create and to express, a part of you is given over to the works you bring into presence. As extensions of yourself, these pieces remain dynamic responses that continue to define who you are and what you mean. We understand the range of dispositions that artists might carry, from careless to careful, intelligent to unresponsive. But in the words of Agnes Martin, the self is inevitably expressed in what one does. In all that I can imagine, God is in dialogue with creation not simply as a manager or master of fine arts, but as an artist in the midst of doing something wrought with meaning, creative interaction, negotiation, and even disappointment.

As we create work and negotiate with it, our work defines us as we define it. If God is similarly reflected in this unfolding universe, perhaps the fullest range of emotions—from discouragement to jubilation—are exchanged on infinite levels at every moment. As long as I am given breath, I seek to become a vehicle through which the deepest moments of discovery, creative learning, and artistic intention can form an assemblage worthy of every moment of discouragement. In this respect, God may be still piecing together the reasons or conclusions for the most surprising realities. In the end there may be a critique of the grandest scale, but as for now I believe the Artist's work will demonstrate a necessity and beauty that satisfy my questioning beyond words. We are a part of that body of work.

I would like to acknowledge my faculty—Ron Graff, Carla Bengtson, Laura Vandenburg, and Amanda Wojick—for their continual investments in my work: cultivating, refining, and prodding the myriad of interests I've laid out before them. In addition I am grateful for the insights and creative energy of Sana Krusoe and Victoria Falk.



Fig. 1
Ruach (installation view)
Oil, silverpoint, mixed media
Dimensions variable



Fig. 2
Time (installation view)
Oil, silver leaf, porcelain dust
Dimensions variable



Fig.3

Predicament

Mixed media and silver leaf on canvas

160"x160"



Fig. 4

Ruach

Mixed media, silver leaf on linen

168" x 128"