An examination of the awareness/role spirituality plays within the process of creation by painters both historically and in contemporary practice and its relevance in conveying divinity/spirituality within their work.

*By Paul McCloskey*
Introduction

The nature of my study is an examination of the awareness spirituality plays within the process of creation by painters both historically and in contemporary practice and its relevance in conveying divinity or spirituality within their work.

For the purpose of this essay when I refer to ‘spirit’, ‘divine’, or ‘spirituality’, I’m not necessarily referring to organised religious groups but more so I'm referring to the belief that creativity can allow us to tap into our higher selves, which has been referred to as God, Spirit, energy or soul, this can open us to being inspired and allows us to sense, see and feel without the influence of the ego. Therefore I believe that being open to divine influence is an essential part of the creative process for the artist, producing work that can engage the viewer in a spiritual experience.

Eileen Kane (1997, p.81) writes in an extract from ‘Neglected Wells’ that, ‘The word ‘spirituality’, understood in its broadest sense, refers, as we know, to the life of spirit that is, spirit as opposed to matter. But it has also the meaning of ‘that which is concerned with sacred or religious things.’ Although I would argue this description does not fully articulate the whole description of spirituality, as I believe spirituality refers also to matter, to the trinity often referred to by Christianity as well as other religions.

As Neal Donald Walsh (1997, p.30-31) describes in his book ‘Conversations with God, book one,’ ‘This Triune Reality is God’s signature. It is the divine pattern. The three-in-one is everywhere found in the realms of the sublime. You cannot escape it in matters dealing with time and space, God and consciousness, or any of the subtle relationships’. He then goes on to say, ‘Some of your religionists have described the Triune Truth as Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Some of your psychiatrists use the terms super conscious, conscious and subconscious. Some of your spiritualists say mind, body and spirit. Some of your scientists see energy, matter, ether.’ I believe this Triune suggests all that is matter and spirit alike makes up the divine.

As western Europeans we tend to see spiritual art as predominantly Christian or religious based, but the Buddhist tradition also acknowledges this spiritual dimension in art, as Yonten Rabje (http://www.artesian-art.org/article4.pdf) writes in his essay, ‘Art as a means of spiritual elevation,’  ‘Art is the most rapid vehicle, after prayer, for connecting directly with one’s Buddha-nature,’ Rabje, a Buddhist monk, lives at Samye Ling Tibetan Centre where, in retreat, he began to paint for the first time in his life. He said, ‘Art without spirituality gradually dies out. Because art, unlike other means of intellectual production, is an activity that is essentially of our Buddha-nature’. It can be difficult to refer to spirituality without making reference to the religions of the world, and indeed it cannot be denied the contribution organised religions have made to the world of art, but those references at times are necessary, particularly as the imagery, iconography and symbols are indelibly written into our way of visualising what we deem as spiritual. But for the most part I will focus on the non religious meaning as
discussed earlier. As Richard Harries states in ‘Art and the Beauty of God’ (1993, p114) ‘True art always has a spiritual dimension. Yet if religion tries to turn it into propaganda the spiritual could slip away. Works of art inescapably witness, by their truth and beauty, to their fount and origin in God himself. Yet religion, always in danger of being corrupted and corrupting, does not have art at its beck and call. It cannot use if for its own ends. It can, however, recognize and praise both the artist and the artist’s God, and, where appropriate, seek to express its own deepest truths in works of truth and beauty. The artist may or may not have a professed religious faith. From an artistic point of view that does not affect the spirituality of the work produced’.

The practice of painting, the tactile quality of the material, allows the artist to take responsibility for all the marks made. Every choice of colour, texture, composition etc must come through the painter, therefore during that process of creation they have complete freedom to express, complete freedom of choice and therefore, I believe are more open to 'divine influence' at every stage of the creative process and consequently as painters can become a mediator to this influence. Kasimir Malevich said, ‘with the most primitive means the artist creates something which the most ingenious and efficient technology will never be able to create.’ (Caws, 2000, p.408). I would interpret this as meaning that the most basic and tactile materials such as paint, allow the artist to have a more direct connection with his creation, through the hands on manipulation and absolute choice of material, tone, texture, colour, composition etc, thus leaving the artist more susceptible to divine influences. In an extract from ‘Sacred and profane Beauty, The Holy in Art’ from ‘Theological Aesthetics’ Gesa Thiessen (2004, p312) Gerardus van der Leeuw states that, ‘Art is nature and culture, and in both holiness is revealed. But it is also and even primarily creature, the creation of God. Whoever believes this cannot view art as a birth from the primal womb; he cannot view it as a conquest of man. Of course, it is this, but by nature it is something else. The holy will of God also stands behind art.’

The belief that we are made in the image of God, creators in our own right, is not a new concept, but add to this the artist/painter as specifically creative, a maker of something new, then these creations become something more than mere matter, but also a reflection of that other part of the trinity that makes the whole ‘spirit’. Richard Harries refers to this in ‘Art and the Beauty of God’ (1993, p102) when he says, ‘Human beings, made in the image of God, share in the divine creativity. We also have the capacity for creative, beautiful ordering. In particular, artists of every kind share in the work of the divine artist by giving form to recalcitrant matter. They give shape to the shapeless and in so doing reflect the work of eternal wisdom’. Harris refers to this above in a very clear and factual manner, as indeed have other painters throughout history such as Turner, Blake and Rothko.

This ethereal facet within the work of these painters is something not easily communicated, and is dependant on the visual language of painting to be subtle, delicate and open to itself rather than something controlled, crafted or forced. I believe it is the duty of the painter to be open to divine influence and I would question whether great art can be made without this openness. This is stated clearly by Gesa Thiessen in ‘Neglected Wells: Spirituality and the Arts’ (1997, p110) she goes on to say, ‘In fact, one may suggest that all great art is spiritual because it is essentially born of the spirit, i.e. of what is most profound in the individual human soul, mind and experience’.
Bridget Riley also refers to this place that is beyond logic, beyond ego, beyond thinking, ‘There is an area, and a very sensitive primary area for an artist, which cannot be referred to directly without damage. It is as though the impulse which is about to be expressed should remain unavailable to the logic of the intellect in order to find its true form in whatever field or metier the artist has chosen’. Robert Kudielka, ‘The Eye’s Mind: Bridget Riley Collected Writings 1965-1999’ (1999, p11)

So here it is seen that the painter must be ever vigilant, open and alert to this sensitive primary area. Thus the burden or struggle of the artist is to assess the level to which he/she is open and alert when new work is being created. Though the onus is surely on the artist to be open to these influences and honest in expressing them in his/her work I believe the circle is not complete until that connection is communicated to the viewer. Therefore the audience also plays a vital role, but not merely as dormant observers of the painting being viewed, but as an active participant in completing the spiritual experience. Karen Stone makes reference to this in ‘Image and Spirit’ (2003, p13) when she says, ‘Viewers bear considerable responsibility for the artwork’s interpretation. Those who expect to sit passively by while the art does something to them are missing the point. It cannot be stated too strongly or too often that the viewer is a full partner in the transaction. The artist who finishes a work and displays it for others to see relinquishes further control over it. If perception is necessary to visual communication, then the viewer’s response is a necessary part of the artwork’s completeness’. After all any sound communication, must embrace the viewer. But once the works are completed, the painter, the creator must also become the viewer; he/she must also stand back and experience the work as an active witness, open to seeing it as separate from them and attempt to reconnect with the work while being open to the divine influence. Mark Rothko made reference to this when he said, ‘The instant a picture is completed, the artist becomes an outsider who must experience the work, like any other viewer, as revelation’. ‘Twentieth Century Artists on Art’ (1996, p248)

When the painter is open and taking alert and conscious responsibility for every mark, brushstroke, colour, thickness of paint and composition, with no real purpose other than to reflect honestly the act of creating, with no real purpose other than to be open to divine influence, when an attempt to represent a given organised religion is absent, therefore not contrived in any way, then I believe the painter is at his/her most susceptible to the unconscious part where creativity emanates. It is here where the painter becomes the mediator, allowing creativity to come through them rather than from them. Mark P. Hederman makes reference to this in ‘The Haunted Inkwell’ (2001, p30-33) when he says, ‘However, it is from the unconscious that all great spiritual or religious art emanates. It does not come from a conscious embracing of religious creeds or principals; nor does it arise from implementation of a strategic religious plan, a propagation of a particular set of creedal formulae, or the adoption of a specific code of religious conduct’. He goes on to say, ‘it is God actively involved in the work: divine energy. It is God’s spirit at work. Such truth does not come to us; it comes through us’...... ‘Great art of the second kind, which allows God’s creative spirit to take shape in the world, requires humility. We have to yield to this spirit’...’it means diminishing the self so that the other source of inspiration may increase’. This sensitivity, openness, willingness to mediate rather than control can best be described
as humility, an obeisance to something we are a part of, that separate from it we are less, but connected, with humility, we have an illimitable resource.

Although there are many painters and movements that could be discussed within the historical context of this essay, such as El Greco or the Baroque period, I will mainly focus on Turner and Rothko. For the Contemporary section I have interviewed four practicing contemporary painters whose work I admire, asking them to answer five questions on what spirituality or divine influence means to them in their daily fine art practice.

**Historical Context**

The marks made throughout prehistoric times, whether they be abstract symbols such as zigzags, concentric circles or indeed early language such as ogham which can be seen at Newgrange in county Meath, to figurative symbolism such as depictions of animals in cave paintings which can be found at Niaux, ‘Composition with Bison, Ibex and Horse’ (*Fig–1*), to pagan representations of the sun, moon and stars, have been associated with a connection to the spiritual, often to gain favour with a source or the divine in order to protect against evil or harm or to assist in the success of the hunt and therefore the survival of a people. These marks or depictions whether or not we can truly relate to their full and true meaning are undeniably acknowledging a spiritual connection, a way of putting meaning to something which often words fail to do, which the visual language of art often universally expresses.

As Moulin writes in his introduction to ‘Prehistoric Painting’ (1969, p7-48) ‘Authentic art materialises the spiritual potential of a culture or civilization inexhaustibly, always ahead of its time: no one can interpret it once and for all, its meanings are not immutable, it reveals our feelings to us’ he goes on to say, ‘They may also be mythical, metaphysical and religious, reflecting the spiritual and social experience of Palaeolithic humanity’. Albeit that all such meanings are not unalterable the acknowledgement here that a spiritual dimension is present seems assured.
The iconography of the Greek manner, Byzantine and Gothic periods in particular the work of Cimabue and Giotto (Fig–2), used symbolic representation of Godly or spiritual ideals. On the surface these triptych or diptych panels would appear to be decorative, commemorative and narrative, that they were mere representations depicting the doctrine of the religious orthodox church it characterised. I would argue that apart from the superficial aspect to ‘religious’ painting, that there is a deeper connection to spirit within that creative process. As Richard Viladesau writes in ‘Theology and the Arts’ (2000, p144) ‘Even when it is intended as a communication of spiritual events and ideas, then, sacred art transcends its spiritual content by adding an interpretive element. This consideration leads us to yet another dimension of art’s function as a religious and theological text: Sacred art aims not merely at the practical catechetical goal of communication of a message, but also at the more specifically artistic goal of visible representation of experience of the divine’. This experience of the divine has been referred to by many artists over the centuries, whether their subject was the human figure, landscape, still life, or indeed religious or biblical themes.

Having visited the Accademia gallery in Florence in March ‘07,’09 and ‘10 and seeing firsthand the series of ‘captives’ or ‘prisoners’ by Michelangelo, (Fig–3), one can sense the powerful release of the figures being freed from the confines of the surrounding marble, almost as if they have a life of their own. When looking directly at these works it seems obvious that he acted as mediator to their release. Michelangelo believed that within the block of stone/marble that the figure already existed, with guidance from the divine and the humility to allow it to work through him, that he was guided to release the figures within. He also believed that the human soul is a prisoner that strives to be released from its bodily form. Perhaps the latter is the true meaning of these works.

Richard Harries writes in, ‘Art and the Beauty of God’ (1993, p101) ‘All works of art, whatever their content, have a spiritual dimension’. This suggests that apart from what we associate as religious or holy in painting, representing in particular Christian imagery that there is another dimension to the creative act itself: This in no way diminishes the powerful symbolic imagery and associations we have with these descriptions when viewing ‘religious’ painting, and to some degree the importance of conveying a sense of the divine, is now after centuries of association part of our visual language, part of our way of seeing. As Gesa Thiessen writes in ‘Theology and Modern Irish Art’ (1999,
p157) ‘In the history of art the sun or bright (yellow-golden) light signifies salvation, hope, life and, more specifically, the divinity of and redemption in Christ, often through the halo’. Julian Bell also refers to this powerful symbolic and significant meaning in painting in his book, ‘What is Painting? Representation and Modern Art’ (1999, p210) when he makes reference to Bellini’s work, ‘The Virgin in Bellini’s picture, (Fig 4), you might say, is represented in synecdoche: a part of her, a certain aspect of her physical being, is shown. The Holy Spirit, however, is represented in metaphor, as a dove: it is this kind of representation that is usually thought of as symbolic’. Whether it’s the use of the halo, light or symbolic representations of the Holy Spirit as a dove, this imagery is an instant recognition of Christian painting. So both the symbolic representation and the less obvious deeper creative process, which can be regarded as spiritual or divine influence, go hand in hand in creating great paintings, which engage the viewer in such a spiritual experience. But I believe that the subject matter whatever its content whether it is perceived as religious or secular is secondary to allowing the creative process or being open to the influence of the divine.

This primary purpose can be seen principally in the work of the romantic painters of the 18th and 19th centuries. In Rosenblum’s book ‘Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko’ he seeks to show that the tradition of romantic painting encompassed a wider net of painters than we are led to traditionally believe, and that these artists sought to realise the divine and transcendentental while continuing to attempt to solve the practical and tactile problems within their work similar to their contemporaries. In reference to Friedrich, Rosenblum goes on to say, ‘Friedrich’s dilemma, his need to revitalise the experience of divinity in a secular world that lay outside the sacred confines of traditional Christian iconography was, as we can still intuit from his works, an intensely personal one’ (1975, p14). As indeed was the work of the great British romantic painter Turner, where he used landscape painting as an arbitrator to the realisation of the divine. His subject matter could generally not be regarded as spiritual and especially religious, yet he sought to express the power of the divine, the ethereal spirit in landscape. His visionary analysis of landscape for which he became so well respected as one of the greatest romantic interpreters of nature, in particular his unrivalled ability of his painting of light, as suggested earlier that Greek iconography used light to express divinity, often in the form of the halo. Although his earlier works could be interpreted as figurative, it is also true to say his later works become increasingly abstract and amorphous. He saw the natural world as un-mastered by man,
and therefore evidence of the power of God. Turner was striving for expression of spirituality in his works, rather than responding just to what he saw. The significance of light in Turners later works in particular was the emanation of God's spirit. This is why his objects became less solid and more atmospheric (Fig–5). As a regular visitor to the annual Turner exhibition in the National Gallery, Dublin, I’ve seen first hand the power of Turners work and although some are tiny in scale they command attention, capturing the atmospheric and ethereal qualities of landscape. Despite their scale or indeed perhaps because of it there is a precious, jewel like quality to his works, one senses passion and veneration when viewing his work. It’s also obvious from seeing Turners work that large scale paintings are by no means a prerequisite for capturing the vastness and spirit of the landscape.

Julian Bell suggests this shift in emphasis in his book ‘What is Painting? Representation and Modern Art’ that during the 18th century that emphasis gathered a different conceptual weight, with a prominence towards the mental as opposed to the external. Leading to a development of the philosophy of ‘aesthetics’ with theories formulated about the specific experience of seeing painting, he writes, ‘Such speculation led Romantic theorists to conceive of artists as bringing into being a realm of ideal beauty – whether as agents of the divine, or out of their own ‘genius’. Beauty was the good that art offered humanity, an experience of the truths of form that was perfectly shaped and attuned to its mental and spiritual nature. Art thus tended to become equivalent to the divine an end in itself’ (1999, p174).

Vincent Van Gogh spoke of this divine influence and the importance of ‘God’ within his and other great works of art, he also spoke of the higher self in the creative process, of something greater outside of himself, but an intrinsic part of him, that worked through him when he painted. Mark Roskill quotes Van Gogh in ‘The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh’ (1993, p123-4) July 1880. ‘I think that everything that is really good and beautiful, the inner, moral, spiritual and sublime beauty in men and their works, comes from God’.....‘try to grasp the essence of what the great artists, the serious masters, say in their masterpieces, and you will again find God in them’.

In exploring the depiction of divinity or spirituality in painting I believe it is essential to recognize and study the work of Mark Rothko. His later works recurrently consist of floating rectangles of shimmering colour on large canvases that manage to simultaneously convey a deep sensuality and a profound spirituality. ‘For art to me is an anecdote of the spirit, and the only means of making

Fig – 6. Rothko. The Chapel Series. Houston, Texas. (1971)
concrete the purpose of its varied quickness and stillness’. Mark Rothko, ‘Twentieth Century Artists on Art’ (1996, p247) He later abandoned the novel topics of contemporary art, making his goal to relieve modern man’s spiritual emptiness. Returning to the triptych (Despite its basis in religious symbolism, as discussed earlier) in his Chapel Paintings, (Fig–6) consisting of a monochrome triptych in soft brown on the central wall, and a pair of triptychs on the left and right made of opaque black rectangles. Between the triptychs are four individual paintings, and one additional individual painting faces the central triptych from the opposite wall. This is the conclusion of six years of Rothko’s life and represents his gradually growing concern for the transcendent. For some, to witness these paintings is to submit one’s self to a spiritual experience. Rothko states, ‘I am not interested in relationships of colour or form or anything else......I am interested only in expressing the basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on and the fact that lots of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I communicate with those basic human emotions. The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them’. Selden Rodman, ‘Conversations with artists’ (1957, p93-94). Having recently viewed two of Rothko’s earlier paintings at IMMA, Dublin, ‘No 8 (multiform)’ (Fig-7), and ‘The green stripe’ (Fig-8), similarly to viewing Turners work directly, I can attest to this connection, energy or spirit the emanates from these works.

It’s apparent that throughout history painters of several genres whether associated with specific movements or with individual vision, both figurative and abstract, both large and small scale acknowledged and embraced the spiritual dimension to their creative endeavours. To these painters this spiritual awareness, this openness to the divine inspiration, plays an integral and indispensable component in the process and expression of their artistic vision.

**Contemporary Context**

It’s evident from my study that painters historically throughout the centuries were aware of the spiritual influence within their work, but I was curious to assess as to whether in contemporary practice other painters apart from myself had an awareness of divine or spiritual influence as described earlier. In order to do this I asked four contemporary painters whose work or practice I admired, to answer five questions relating to this. The questions were phrased in such a way as to allow them the freedom to express their viewpoint unhindered and to give them the opportunity to give a considered response to the questions. The questionnaire was sent by email and all
responded by email except one who responded by letter. Their answers are not edited or altered in any way as I wanted to reflect honestly their thoughts and opinions. Below are the interviews including a short biography and explanation of each painter's work.

**Helen Gaynor – Interview**


Wexford born, Helen Gaynor attended the National College of Art and Design, Dublin, graduating with Honours in Fine Art, Painting, in 1995, receiving an award for her thesis. Helen has exhibited widely and belongs to several national collections, as well over ten solo shows. Helen was recipient of the Wexford County Council Bursary for Visual Arts in 2000. Recent art practice has included improvisation with musicians, to produce sound pieces in addition to visual works, work which culminated in an exhibition entitled *Colour Garden* at Garter Lane, Waterford in 2005, and *Journey* at Newtownbarry House, Bunclody in 2007.

Gaynor is attracted to the work of artists who respect a painterly approach, brushstrokes are evident and there is a certain devotion to the potential of colour. She is herself, a superb colourist. Colour selections and combinations are paradoxically both in tune with nature but simultaneously at a remove. *(Fig- 9)*

‘She (Gaynor) has previously been best known as a highly accomplished decorative painter… The largest, multi-panel piece, *Reflection*, recalls Hackneys’ bold attempts to depict the moving surface of a pool of water. Gaynor employs minimal means with great flair in a terrifically mobile evocation of a rippled surface… current concentration on space, light and atmosphere’.

Aidan Dunne, Irish Times, Oct 14, 2009

*Fig- 9. Confluence, (2007) by Helen Gaynor. Ink and oil on canvas (30cmX102cm)*
1. Do you believe that there is a spiritual dimension (such as divine influence, connecting to something within ourselves but also greater than ourselves) to creating your art?

The aim of the artist in making art is usually to impact in some way beyond the physical. That is not to deny that there must be a physical impact on the viewer, for example that achieved in the work of say Bridget Riley on the optics and the impact of colour in general. Nevertheless, it is the intention of the artist to move/stir the viewer some way beyond those physical reactions, through the use of the physical.

In the broadest sense of definition of the Spiritual, there is little doubt that it plays a significant part in the creation of work, and I believe I experience some vital force, either of Self or of Other at certain stages in the making of work. Because the act of painting is a physical thing, this is expressed in a very physical way, in the flick of the brush and impulsive addition of the unexpected, indeed those choices made with no base in rational thought. While subject wise, I respond to both the material and the immaterial, (I regularly revisit aspects of the physicality of painting in my objectives ) I consider that I am closest to achieving good work, when I am working beyond the physical, and indeed beyond the intellectual, which I don’t believe to equate with the Spiritual. Expressed in a physical way, painting at that stage seems to be driven by some other force or compulsion. This experience tends to present at a later part in the exploration of the subject.

2. Do you believe great art can be created without being open to this influence? Is it a necessary part of the creative process for you?

It is difficult to summarise, or be definitive about all ‘great art’, and whether great art can be created without being open to the influence of the Spiritual. I do think that the creative urge in itself is a basic fundamental urge, which could be described as ‘spiritual’. We do not always understand the why, but can be described as a compulsion, and it does seem to fulfil a huge need.

In reading what good artists write, and in listening to what they have to say with regard to their working process, it seems to me that in general, those processes do not appear to be that different to my own, and so I will refer to what I find in relation to my own work. Generally what we see in the work of others reflects our own experiences. Exploring subject matter beyond that which I can predict, which I believe to be in the realms of the ‘Spiritual’, is part of where I hope to go in the making of work. Furthermore, I am regularly struck by the way threads of connection go through what I do as an artist. Sometimes these are not connections I see instantly, and it is frequently in looking retrospectively at work done that one sees them.

What is great art? How do I define it?

Great visual art, for me, has to include a strong visual dimension. While I look for aspects of the physical – shapes, surface, texture, composition - it is still some unassailable quality
3. How would you describe this influence? (the spiritual dimension)

The urge to create itself  
The actual subjects one chooses to explore  
The threads of connectivity between these  
When the work moves from the conscious following of plan to that dimension where it’s out of your hands

4. Is this influence something you are aware of at any stage of the creative process, before, during or after? If so in what way are you aware of it?

I am most aware of the spiritual dimension to the creative process at a later part in the exploration of a subject. The starting point sees the blank surface being tackled with some kind of deliberate intention. So, the work begins with conscious thought, a plan of action that usually involves the physical, and indeed frequently some kind of image in the mind’s eye. Through the exploration of the subject in paint, the painter moves towards the unconscious, moving to a stage that is instinctive, intuitive, and beyond deliberate intent. While that stage touches on the very essence of the individual, it seems to move beyond individual choice or control, which could perhaps be attributed to another being, but which certainly seems to tap into that which is universal. From the state of the known, the painter pursues a path that leads further into the unknown.

The process of painting involves looking closely at the world and at the minutiae of our experiences, physical or otherwise. It is this close examination of things pertaining to our reality that brings us beyond the realm of that reality. Painting allows for the exploration of ideas and thoughts, half formed, in the tiniest chinks of our minds. In a sense, one could see the making of art as an opportunity for spiritual adventure. On a personal level, the further into unknown territory I go, the more I like it, although not otherwise particularly brave or adventurous. One feels the best painting is when there is no longer the pursuit of particular intent, but rather something else, almost outside of oneself, although in fact very definitely inside oneself, that unique part of one that makes one one. It is a process where frequently aimlessness is good, where, when left to its own devices, what is real at the very core of the person and the mind, comes to the fore, to be expressed through the medium of paint.

5. What do you think makes a painting a great work of art (painting)?

For me, a visual piece has to have some strength in its visual appeal. It may have a concentration of either one or other or several of the many elements that strengthen the visual, but whatever elements of good craftsmanship it incorporates, these are combined with that extra dimension, we have been describing as the Spiritual, a quality which by its very nature is almost indefinable.
In some way the work touches the viewer, in a way that usually surpasses the physical or intellectual impact. When viewing the paintings of Peter Doig, I found myself moved to tears, and knew that his actual subject matter did not produce that strength of emotion. I did not know why, just that I was. Painting allows us to go to places we never intended going and to move to dream like states, without sleeping.

It is a privilege to paint.

Anne Madden – Interview

Madden, A., 2010. Interview Questions. [email] (Personal communication, 09 Mar 2010)

Anne Madden was born in London in 1932 to Irish and Anglo-Chilean parents, she spent her first years in Chile but was raised in Co. Clare and in London, where she studied at the Chelsea School of Art. Between 1970 and 1979 Madden painted a large series of vertical works entitled Megalith and Openings derived from prehistoric monuments. The artist has since developed a large body of work including the Pompeii and Garden series (1980 - 1990); Odyssey and Icarus series (1990 - 2000) and the Garden of Love series (2001-2003). The artist has held more than 50 solo exhibitions and her work is held by national museums and modern art collections worldwide. In 2004 she was awarded an honorary degree from University College Dublin. A major retrospective of her work was held by the Irish museum of Modern Art Dublin in 2007.

For the last few years, Anne Madden has been making paintings about the Northern Lights, (Fig- 10) which seems to be an appropriately northern subject, now that she has returned to Ireland after spending many years in the South of France. These paintings are ambitious in scale, spectacular in their depiction of chromatic contrasts and highly

Fig – 10. Aurora borealis snake of light,( 2006) oil on linen, triptych. Anne Madden.(146cmX26 cm)
accomplished in their technique, but they are also Romantic in their conception and resonant with symbolic potential. Madden described them as paintings about different layers of light, implying that they were merely an analysis of physical phenomena; they are much more than this, however. Madden paints deep and ambiguous spaces – a constant feature in her work, which invite us nonetheless to explore metaphysical ideas when looking at them.

1. Do you believe that there is a spiritual dimension (such as divine influence, connecting to something within ourselves but also greater than ourselves) to creating your art?

I don't think it is an external divine influence because I feel it is an intrinsic mysterious energy residing in an artist which must be released into the making of a painting. The artist must lose him or herself for this to happen.

2. Do you believe great art can be created without being open to this influence? Is it a necessary part of the creative process for you?

Yes, I believe it is a vital component of any great work of art. If it doesn't emerge the painting won't function.

3. How would you describe this influence?

Paint, a formless matter, metamorphoses into an autonomous form, hitherto unseen, strange, and which emanates a powerful force - a virtual reality. All great painting has this force which gives it an almost awesome aura.

4. Is this influence something you are aware of at any stage of the creative process, before, during or after? If so in what way are you aware of it?

I am aware when I have let go of a painting and it then leads the dance.

5. What to you makes a painting a great work of art (painting)?

Bridget Riley answers your question very well about the source of an artist ability to bring about a work of art.

‘There is an area and a very sensitive primary area for an artist, which cannot be referred to directly without damage. It is as though the impulse which is about to be expressed should remain unavailable to the logic of the intellect in order to find its true form in whatever field or metier the artist has chosen’. Also (See 3)
Maria Charlton was born in Dublin, but is now living and working in Gorey, County Wexford. She studied fine art painting in Dun Laoghaire College of Art and Design from 1990 to 1994 and later attended the Crawford College of Art, in Cork from 1996 to 1997. She was the recipient of the prestigious Charles Brady HRHA Award, at the Royal Hibernian Academy annual Submission exhibition in 2000 and she was granted the artists tax exemption in 2001. Her work has been collected nationally and abroad.

Landscape has been the main inspiration for Charlton to date. The experience of visually recording the landscapes many moods and colours, mist, clouds and shimmering light along the horizon, the sense of stillness and quietness which one can experience in the landscape, (Fig-11) where cloud encompasses land, moving it in and out of focus: they are all qualities interpreted in Charlton’s work. Her work explores these elements but also evolve from her emotional response to the landscape. Her work portrays the duality of nature, the mystery of life existing in two opposed forces. The activity along the horizon sets up a dialogue between land and sky, heaven and earth.

\[ \text{Fig – 11. Landscape, (2000) by Maria Charlton. Oil on canvas (33cm x 39cm)} \]

1. Do you believe that there is a spiritual dimension (such as divine influence, connecting to something within ourselves but also greater than ourselves) to creating your art?

I do believe that there can be or indeed is a spiritual dimension within creativity. There is as I describe it a 'power beyond myself' or indeed in my case, when painting, it's when I connect with this dimension that good works are created. As I become more immersed in my work, 'something' takes over, that something for me is 'soul' or a 'deepness within'.
2. Do you believe great art can be created without being open to this influence? Is it a necessary part of the creative process for you?

It depends on what one perceives as great art. I would also question if all art could be considered spiritual? However when thinking about this question in terms of myself, I feel that when I have created my better works, there has been that connection.

3. How would you describe this influence?

This influence for me as described earlier is a 'power beyond myself'. Thinking about it, maybe it’s more a connection with the 'whole self'- mind, body and soul.

4. Is this influence something you are aware of at any stage of the creative process, before, during or after? If so in what way are you aware of it?

It is not something that I am consciously aware of when painting. The process of painting allows you to become immersed, it takes you into another dimension.

I think if or when I am aware of this dimension is when intuitively, I know when a painting is complete or indeed on returning to view a piece after some time, I am moved by my own work. It’s in those moments that I recognise or have a sense of this influence/dimension. On reflection also, there have been times when the subject matter of my work, i.e., nature speaks to me on a deeper lever, and so it’s also in the inspiration, the 'before' that I have sensed this influence.

5. What to you makes a painting a great work of art (painting)?

For me, a great work of art (i.e. a painting) has to as it were - speak to me or indeed make me feel something on a deep level. Good technical skills contribute to a good piece of work, but a great work of art has to go further. It has to run deeper than mere representation - it has to capture the viewer, it has to make the viewer feel something - in the mind, heart or soul.

Paul Doran – Interview


Paul Doran was born in Co. Wexford in 1972 where he continues to live and work. He received a Masters in Fine Art from the National College of Art and Design, Dublin and was awarded the prestigious AIB Art Prize in 2005. His work is included in many important public and private collections such as, The Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, The Arts Council of Ireland, Dublin City Gallery (Hugh Lane) as well as private collections throughout the world.
Doran is known for his small format for works, but he challenges the viewer by creating works whose canvases are literally oozing with paint. Doran continues to use the vivid and extraordinary colour combinations that made his earlier works so seductive. However, with this latest body of work, the artist has become more inventive with the surfaces. Using razor blades to slice open the paint’s surface, or his fingers to rip away the partially dried surfaces, Doran creates fissures and imprints while simultaneously re-applying patches of excess colour and troweling paint to the extreme edges of the canvas board (Fig-12). "For me, practical and conceptual concerns are inseparable. We live in a world that is more easily defined by technology, but I am interested in ideas about the handmade, how human existence can be communicated through the handmade in a more meaningful way. There is a real difference between process paintings and paintings that emphasise the presence of the human hand. For me, the latter is a more conceptual approach. I think that ideas about the handmade have an important role to play in a contemporary context." Paul Doran.

1. Do you believe that there is a spiritual dimension (such as divine influence, connecting to something within ourselves but also greater than ourselves) to creating your art?

For a long time I was sceptical of the spiritual in art, and believed that it was used as a label for work (painting) that could not be easily explained. I now believe that the spiritual is that innate drive that an artist must have, that same drive where the work of the artist goes, even if this path is difficult. An artist only truly is in touch with the spiritual when there is no compromise, compromise is not an option. The spiritual is experienced deeply when an artist gives all in his/her work and is not swayed by trends or art market desires. The spiritual for an artist is an isolated and lonely path, but the only one worth living.

2. Do you believe great art can be created without being open to this influence? Is it a necessary part of the creative process for you?

If one believes that the spiritual for an artist is only experienced when a truth is followed, without compromise, then great art cannot be created without the spiritual.
3. How would you describe this influence?

It is a search for truth and honesty, of knowing oneself and accepting oneself fully. When an artist reaches this point there is no compromise and truly real and original work is made. The spiritual is real.

4. Is this influence something you are aware of at any stage of the creative process, before, during or after? If so in what way are you aware of it?

I am aware of this influence at every point in the creative process, because for an artist compromise is hell and the spiritual is an acceptance that compromise is not an option.

5. What to you makes a painting a great work of art (painting)?

For me a painting is great when I am aware of the hand and the mind of the artist (the maker) a painting that just parades skill is like a great musician simply playing the scales. A great painting is without ego, it is of the maker and completely separate of the maker, at the same time. A great painting is conceptually, physically and emotionally engaging.

Evidently it can be seen from these interviews, that the spiritual dimension in particular during the creative process is very much relevant in contemporary painting. ‘In the broadest sense of definition of the Spiritual, there is little doubt that it plays a significant part in the creation of work, and I believe I experience some vital force, either of Self or of Other at certain stages in the making of work’. Gaynor, (appendix 1). ‘Yes, I believe it is a vital component of any great work of art. If it doesn't emerge the painting won't function’. Madden, (appendix 2). ‘As I become more immersed in my work, 'something' takes over, that something for me is 'soul' or a 'deepness within'. Charlton, (appendix 3). ‘If one believes that the spiritual for an artist is only experienced when a truth is followed, without compromise, then great art cannot be created without the spiritual’. Doran, (appendix 4). This influence is evident and also relevant to these painters both as a process and a realisation of the finished painting. Without the spiritual these painters categorically feel their work converses considerably less. ‘In some way the work touches the viewer, in a way that usually surpasses the physical or intellectual impact. When viewing the paintings of Peter Doig, I found myself moved to tears, and knew that his actual subject matter did not produce that strength of emotion. I did not know why, just that I was’. Gaynor, (appendix 1).

The affiliation to a particular organised religion or indeed to none is not the motivating dynamic in the honesty, alertness and awareness necessary to create paintings of worth, the spiritual or divine influence is, this is acknowledged by all the painters interviewed as a given. Gesa Thiessen makes reference to this in ‘Theology and Modern Irish Art’ (1999, p58) when she discusses the work of the renowned contemporary painter Louis Le Brocquy, ‘Le Brocquy, however in no way denies the realm of the spiritual and the transcendent. He has described himself as someone who
does not hold definite religious views, as an ‘agnostic, who tries to keep his window on to the reality as widely open as possible’. Also in her introduction to ‘Theological Aesthetics’ (2004, p5) she refers to the importance and attraction of the image of divinity still holds us in fascination when she says, ‘Certainly, while the church pews often remain empty, the totally unexpected crowds at the Image of Christ exhibition in 2000 at the National Gallery, London, are a striking reminder how the image of God, the beauty of Christ, the vision of the invisible divine still attracts in our frequently cynical post-modern age’.

Perhaps painting speaks more directly to the soul or spirit of the viewer than the endless rituals and doctrine of organised religions, perhaps the fascination with the divine, the connection, the knowing, the yearning to fill the emptiness and voids that organised religions have left, never more so than in these modern times, is now being fulfilled and now being satisfied more unswervingly and honestly through painting, perhaps the need to be understood, to be recognised and to see ourselves represented visually, this need, this intrinsic aspect of the human condition that people have experienced since the first cave paintings and marks were made in prehistoric times, is now expressed and represented more accurately by those contemporary painters who have the awareness not to compromise and who have the humility to be open to this inspiration, be it divine, spiritual or whatever label used, in the realisation of their painting.

**Conclusion**

As discussed, clearly throughout history the awareness of the spiritual for painters, both as an intrinsic part of their creative process as well as necessary for connecting with their audience has been well documented. Conscious awareness of the role of the divine influence is acknowledged and indeed celebrated by many painters throughout the ages, from pre-history, Classical, Greek and Byzantine, Renaissance and Baroque to Turner, Blake and Friedrich the great exponents of the Romantic movement of the 19th century. Artists such as Rothko, whose passion for and lifetime quest to express the divine through his paintings, particularly in his chapel series, were and still remain hugely influential. Similarly the four contemporary painters interviewed evidently acknowledge the significance of divine inspiration or the role spirituality plays in the development and creation of their painting, as well as acknowledging its value in the making of great art and therefore its connection with the audience, but not merely as dormant observers of the painting being viewed, but as active participants in completing the spiritual experience, as discussed earlier.

Irrespective of the subject matter or theme choice of the painter, whether figurative, abstract, large or small scale, whether the painter’s belief system is religious, agnostic or otherwise, as Stone states ‘In contemporary usage, spiritual is a term that has a broad array of meanings – psychological, mystical, otherworldly, or even referent to some vague supreme power as “The Source” of intergalactic fantasy’. ‘Image and Spirit’ (2003, p11), and recognising the importance in the craft necessary to express and make works of art, this is secondary to the painter being open with humility, having
an alert awareness with the absence of ego in the making of their paintings, how a painter reaches this state can be a deeply personal one and is as varied as there are individuals, for some it may be to delve into their past or to use meditation or work from imagination to working directly from life. What’s most relevant is the recognition of the spiritual/divine whether that be explained as such or explained as ‘It is a search for truth and honesty, of knowing oneself and accepting oneself fully’ (Doran) or 'power beyond myself' (Charlton) or ‘powerful force - a virtual reality’ (Madden) or ‘it seems to move beyond individual choice or control, which could perhaps be attributed to another being, but which certainly seems to tap into that which is universal’ (Gaynor) it amounts to the same thing, being inspired within and without, this inspiration which is easier understood when felt rather than explained in words. When felt then the choices of colours, composition and marks made become inspired rather than contrived. It is here, in that place, irrespective of the words used to describe it as discussed above, where I believe the painter is most open, most susceptible to creating great paintings.
Bibliography


List of Images

Fig. 1. UNKNOWN (Middle Magdalenian) Composition with Bison, Ibex and Horse. [Painting] In: MOULIN, RAOUL-JEAN (1969) Prehistoric painting. New York, Funk & Wagnalls.

Fig. 2. Giotto Di Bondone. The Stefaneschi Triptych. (1330) [Online image] Available from: http://www.giottodibondone.org/The-Stefaneschi-Triptych-(recto)-c.-1330.html [Accessed 01/04/10].


Fig. 4. BELLINI. JACOPO (early 1430s) The Annunciation [Painting] In: BELL, J (1999) What is Painting? Representation and Modern Art, London, Thames and Hudson.


