

Presence and Absence: The Paintings of Andrew Musgrave

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For a radical hermeneutic, God is always and everywhere, in all the epochs, essentially withdrawn from the world, even as faith says He is omnipresent. His very self-giving is self-withdrawing, a-lethic. God is never *given* in some sheer excess of presence or plenitude... His presence is deferred even as it is revealed... God's presence is always caught up in the play of presence and absence. The faith of the believer consists in staying in play with that play, which involves maximum risk and uncertainty. Far from having magical powers, the eyes of faith suffer systematic strain from having always to do with shadowy forms and twilight figures.¹

Philosophers typically like things to be determinate and decidable. Philosophers of religion, in particular, do not like to contemplate anything less than a god whose qualities or attributes are precisely delineated (usually in a highly abstract and technical language), with the overall aim of reaching a decision as to whether to categorise themselves as 'theists' and reality itself as 'theistic.' To arrive at such a decision, it is often presumed that empirical evidence both in support of and against religious belief must be sought and carefully evaluated. And as a result of this almost forensic investigation a determination can be made as to how likely it is that religious belief is true.² Finally, only if the balance of probabilities tilts heavily in favour of religious belief is it rationally acceptable to make a personal commitment to religion, a commitment that is forever revisable and contingent on the latest proofs and disproofs of God's existence published in the professional philosophy journals.

This familiar Enlightenment model of religious belief has come under fire from many quarters, most vigorously perhaps from the postmodern camp. Contemporary postmodern philosophers, writing in the wake of Nietzsche,

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¹ John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 279-80, emphasis in the original.

² Richard Swinburne, for example, employs such a procedure in *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003) and arrives at the conclusion that "the total evidence makes it very probable that Jesus was God Incarnate who rose from the dead" (p. 203), a conclusion to which he ascribes a probability-value of 0.97 (see p. 214).

Freud, Heidegger and Derrida, adopt a suspicious stance towards the Enlightenment model, viewing it as preoccupied less with neutral, objective reason than with, say, unconscious drives, relations of power, or simply an understanding of rationality and truth that is more at home in the physical sciences than in religious practice. Contemporary philosophy of religion, of the Continental variety, has in fact witnessed a ‘theological turn,’ where the insights of postmodern theory are brought to bear on the rich theological traditions of the Abrahamic faiths in order to reclaim God from the hands of rationalistically-minded philosophers. John Caputo is exemplary in this regard: the very attempt to decide once and for all who or what God is, to decide who counts as a ‘believer’ and who as an ‘unbeliever,’ to decide which is the one true religion – all this is thrown into question, disturbing the certainties of the confessional faiths with a radical non-knowing that leaves us in a desert-like *khora*, hanging on by a prayer, with/out a prayer.³

Within this dry desert *khora* the paintings of Andrew Musgrave grow and flourish, somewhat like the monastic desert fathers and mothers of old. Based in Melbourne, Australia, Musgrave studied the humanities and law at university before turning, a bit over a decade ago, to painting. Primarily self-taught, with remarkably little formal training in painting, Musgrave is now consistently producing a body of profound and penetrating work.

Initially, Musgrave was preoccupied with quasi-realistic self-portraits, often angst-ridden and mortified, and sometimes reminiscent of the screaming faces of Munch and Bacon. Gradually, however, the images would become more abstract and more reflective of the artist’s own passage through death, renewal and transformation, until Musgrave would finally settle on a distinctive style of his own that has been described, and rightly so, as “abstract expressionism, but with a soul.”

“Abstract” because of the non-representational character of the paintings: there is a clear resistance to the realistic depiction of the everyday world of objects. Like his predecessors, the ‘Irascibles’ of the 1940s and 50s, Musgrave’s anti-figurative aesthetic (a kind of aesthetic purity) eschews any attempt to literally mirror or mimic reality, or even to reference it by means of historically or culturally significant symbols.

And “expressionist” for, again like his predecessors, the canvas is for Musgrave the site of an out-pouring of the self. Painting becomes an act of self-expression, brimming with emotional intensity, passionate and chaotic, laying down imprints of the serenity and turmoil of inner life. To achieve this, however, a spontaneous and instinctual temperament is necessary: Musgrave

³ For an excellent introduction to Caputo’s philosophy of religion, see his *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001).

does not draft any plans for what he is going to paint, and his connection to the raw materials – a primed canvas, oil paints, and solid mediums including pumice and marble dust – is always an intimate one (he refuses to use brushes, for example, as he feels they introduce too great a distance between his body and the canvas, and he likes to spend much time mixing and blending his materials in a state of “meditational mindfulness” prior to putting anything on the canvas).⁴

But also, and perhaps most importantly, “with a soul”: in the tradition of Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko, the intensity we find in Musgrave is spiritual in character. Musgrave’s paintings are situated, as it were, between the visible and the invisible, traversing the depths of the unconscious and the heights of the divine in a way that is foreclosed to those of us who labour only with words and concepts as our tools. This break-through into the worlds above and below is achieved by means of abstraction, by the break-down of recognisable figures and forms.

Not surprisingly for an abstract expressionist, Musgrave has a predilection towards large canvases. His canvases, some of which are triptychs, can measure up to 240cm lengthwise and up to 196cm in height. The confronting scale of the works invites – some would say commands – the beholder to contemplation, even prayer. (Musgrave himself often paints on his knees, as though seeking divine inspiration.) Anything smaller would not have the same effect, but would also obstruct the intimate connection – or, better still, communion – between the artist and the canvas. Mark Rothko put the point well on the occasion of a symposium in 1951: “I paint very large pictures. I realize that historically the function of painting large pictures is painting something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them, however – I think it applies to other painters I know – is precisely because I want to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view or with a reducing glass. However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn’t something you command.”⁵

At least one fruitful way of introducing Musgrave’s paintings is by means of a thematic of presence and absence, with an emphasis on how this dichotomy is encountered, interrogated, and finally overcome.

⁴ See the overview of Musgrave’s work written by Leoni Phelan and published on Musgrave’s website (www.andrewmusgrave.com.au), where Musgrave’s preparatory routine is compared to the medieval alchemists’ endeavour to transform base metals into gold.

⁵ Quoted in Barbara Hess, *Abstract Expressionism* (Köln: Taschen, 2006), p. 72.

Presence

In his groundbreaking essay, “The Saturated Phenomenon”⁶, Jean-Luc Marion elaborates Kant’s view that the aesthetic idea, the representation of the beautiful or sublime, is characterised by an excess of donation (or givenness), for as Kant puts it, the “representation of the imagination furnishes much to think, but to which no determinate thought, or concept, can be adequate.”⁷ This opens up the possibility for Marion of “a phenomenon in which intuition would give *more, indeed unmeasurably more*, than intention would have intended or foreseen”⁸, a phenomenon which he goes on to describe as ‘saturated’, that is, saturated with “an excess of intuition, and thus of donation, over the intention, the concept, and the aim.”⁹ This view Marion traces back to Kant:

Kant formulates this excess with a rare term: the aesthetic idea remains an “inexposable [*inexponible*] representation of the imagination.” We can understand this in the following way: because it gives “much,” the aesthetic idea gives more than any concept can expose; to “expose” here amounts to arranging (ordering) the intuitive idea according to rules; the impossibility of this conceptual arrangement issues from the fact that the intuitive overabundance is no longer exposed within rules, whatever they may be, but overwhelms them; intuition is no longer exposed within the concept, but saturates it and renders it overexposed – invisible, not by lack of light, but by excess of light.¹⁰

In a similar vein, the invisible in Musgrave’s work is often manifested as such “not by lack of light, but by excess of light.” In more recent works, particularly *Light in Darkness* (2006), *Ancient Temple* (2006), and the *Sands of Consciousness* series of 2005, but also in earlier pieces such as *The Light Within* (2001), it is the luminous white spaces – at times menaced by dark forces, at other times stretching across (and seemingly beyond) the canvas – which signify an excess of light, where the artist’s palette appears to have spilled over the colour spectrum, and where as a result the invisible becomes most visible. One is reminded here of the description in Mark 9:3 of the Transfiguration of Christ, where it is said that “his clothes became resplendent

⁶ Jean-Luc Marion, ‘The Saturated Phenomenon’, in *Phenomenology and the ‘Theological Turn’: The French Debate*, eds Dominique Janicaud *et al.* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), pp. 176-216.

⁷ Quoted in Marion, ‘The Saturated Phenomenon’, p. 196. The quote is taken from §49 in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*.

⁸ Marion, ‘The Saturated Phenomenon’, p. 195, emphasis in the original.

⁹ Marion, ‘The Saturated Phenomenon’, p. 197. For an introduction to Marion’s notion of saturated phenomena, see Robyn Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion: A Theological Introduction* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), ch. 10.

¹⁰ Marion, ‘The Saturated Phenomenon’, pp. 196-97.

with an excessive white, such as no-one on earth could bleach them.” Marion’s gloss on this passage applies just as much to the vision presented by Mark as to the images presented by Musgrave: “One cannot escape the feeling that *this* white no longer belongs to the physical world and that the artist makes another world visible – as sentient as it remains.”¹¹

These invisible traces are often traces of the Invisible, the divine reality that cannot be adequately represented by means of the traditional philosophical (or, more correctly, anthropomorphic) conception of God as a superhuman being, an infinitely bloated mirror-image of the human self that possesses all the good qualities found in human creatures but to an infinite degree (thus, on this conception, God is not merely powerful but all-powerful, not merely knowledgeable but all-knowing, not merely good but perfectly good, and so on). By contrast, Musgrave points to, in his own words, “a new understanding of God that is outside our rational thought but which is revealed to those who care to take the time to close their eyes, look within and feel deeply enough.”¹² The genre of abstraction within which Musgrave works seems ideally suited to expressing this mystical sense of the divine, for if God is not just another finite object, if God is no-thing, then it is no-thingness or a non-realistic, even anti-realistic, aesthetic that can best disclose the absolute transcendence found within the intensity of immanence. What is thereby revealed is a ‘saturated phenomenon’ which, as Marion explains, “refuses to let itself be looked at as an object, precisely because it appears with a multiple and indescribable excess that suspends any effort at constitution.”¹³

This excess or overabundance is captured in extraordinary fashion in Musgrave’s non-objectifying depictions of the sacred. Musgrave’s trademark atmospheric and misty (if not mystical) scenes highlight our finitude, our incapacity to bring the divine down to our level, to our conceptual framework of precisely demarcated objects. To quote Marion again,

Confronted with the saturated phenomenon, the *I* cannot not see it, but neither can it look at it as its object. It has the eye to see it, but not to look after it [*pour le garder*]. What, then, does this eye without a look [*cet oeil sans regard*] actually see? It sees the overabundance of intuitive *donation*, not, however, as such, but as it is blurred by the overly short lens, the overly restricted aperture, the overly narrow frame that receives it – or rather, that no longer

¹¹ Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), p. 65, fn. 14, emphasis in the original.

¹² This and other direct quotes from Musgrave are taken from Musgrave’s website: www.andrewmusgrave.com.au.

¹³ Marion, ‘The Saturated Phenomenon’, p. 209.

accommodates it. The eye apperceives not so much the appearance of the saturated phenomenon as the blur, the fog, and the overexposure that it imposes on its normal conditions of experience.¹⁴

The Invisible, seen through the restricting lens of human vision, cannot appear as something distinct and familiar, one more object among many others, but only as ‘wholly other’, indeed as Holy Other. It presents itself as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a revelation that, as Marion observes, saturates all four Kantian categories of the understanding at once, for it is *beyond quantity* (unquantifiable, without form or order, immeasurable), *beyond quality* (the weight or intensity of the vision is something that our gaze cannot bear, stripping us of any predicates with which to qualify what we see), *beyond relation* (absolutely singular, bearing no relation to any other phenomenon or experience, a pure event that is not conditioned or delimited by any horizon), and finally *beyond modality* (constituting an ‘experience of the impossible,’ as it does not conform to the conditions of possibility of experience and hence is incapable of being looked at or constituted as an object).¹⁵

But the presence of excess, of the Other in Musgrave’s work does not recapitulate the ‘metaphysics of presence’ as critiqued by Derrida. According to such a metaphysics, our fundamental aim is to grasp pure and unadulterated facts or objects – the ‘noumena’ or ‘things in themselves,’ as Kant would say – and to describe these by means of ‘clear and distinct ideas’ (Descartes) in a precise, logically air-tight and univocal language of the kind dreamed of by the early Wittgenstein. This quest for immediacy, where thought and its object are transparently present to each other, constitutes *the metaphysics of presence*, and its theological analogue can be found in many forms of mysticism. Cases in point, according to Derrida at least, are the negative or ‘apophatic’ theologies of Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart, where God is stripped of all predicates and names – even ‘goodness’ and ‘being’ – and is perceived bare in a moment of mystic union. God here presents himself in the midst of an unmediated vision, that is to say, a vision unmediated by any context (be it temporal, spatial, linguistic, or cultural), thus giving the impression that the object of the vision presents itself in a pure or naked fashion without the falsifying lens of time, culture, and indeed the human cognitive apparatus itself.¹⁶

¹⁴ Marion, ‘The Saturated Phenomenon’, p. 210, emphasis in the original.

¹⁵ See Marion, ‘The Saturated Phenomenon’, pp. 197-216, and *In Excess*, pp. 158-62.

¹⁶ Derrida advances his argument in ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’, trans. Ken Frieden, first published in English in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, eds Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 3-70. Both Kevin Hart and Jean-Luc Marion have

But for postmodernists, for whom ‘there are no facts but only interpretations’ (to borrow from Nietzsche), the metaphysics of presence is a highly dubious affair. What such a metaphysics overlooks, on this account, is the murky and mediated character of our experience of the world. For now, as the apostle Paul states, “we know only in part... Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror” (1 Corinthians 13:9, 12). In other words, we are too deeply embedded in history to achieve a God’s-eye view of the world, where things can be seen as they really are, *sub specie aeternitatis*, free of the distorting influences of our location in a given period of time and in a particular culture. Our knowledge, in short, is never impartial and is always conditioned by our nature and our placement – as a result, the ideal of objective knowledge is unattainable.¹⁷

This epistemic humility, this deep sense of human finitude, also runs through Musgrave’s work. Various materials are brought together to offer a plurality of interpretations of the divine without presuming to have finally attained ‘the Truth.’ Musgrave’s vision is always of de-capitalised truth(s), mediated via a range of striking permutations of colours and tones, forms and shapes, lines and depths, textures and surfaces. What one encounters, then, are not images masquerading as The Divine Name, showing once and for all who or what God is. Instead, what we have is a proliferation of signs on which the numerous names of the divine are inscribed, as is indicated by some of the titles Musgrave has given to his paintings: Poseidon (god of the seas), Mercurius (god of commerce), Mars (god of war), eternal flame, phoenix, essence, void, seductress, humus (earth, ground, soil), rising son.

“Each painting,” notes Musgrave, “represents my commitment to the process of ‘Lifting the Veil’ of my own illusions and discovering a deeper truth.” However, this process of ‘lifting the veil’ (the title of Musgrave’s first solo exhibition) is not geared towards uncovering an unmediated presence, a

contested Derrida’s reading of Pseudo-Dionysius – see Hart’s Introduction to the 2000 edition of *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), pp. xxiv-xxvi; see Marion, ‘In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of It’, first published in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, eds John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 20-42, but later re-published with minor revisions in Marion, *In Excess*, pp. 128-162. On the relationship between negative theology and the metaphysics of presence, see also Arthur Bradley, ‘God *Sans* Being: Derrida, Marion and “A Paradoxical Writing of the Word *Without*,”’ *Literature and Theology*, vol. 14 (2000): 299-312.

¹⁷ For a good summary of the postmodern critique of the metaphysics of presence, and how it can be appropriated by the Christian philosopher, see Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), ch. 4.

vision of the divine nature as it is in and of itself, untainted by human reason and emotion. Lifting the veil, rather, involves making full use of reason and emotion so as to overcome our ignorance. The overall goal, however, is not to accumulate more and more knowledge, but to attain what the mystical tradition calls a *docta ignorantia*, a learned or wise ignorance that transcends the order of knowledge altogether. Here we enter the dark seas of negative theology: “Through the act of painting I enter a space of ‘not knowing,’” confesses Musgrave. But unlike the apophatic theologies censured by Derrida, the apophatic journey in Musgrave’s paintings is an attempt to loosen the hold of objectifying epistemology, where a stable knowing subject can grasp and objectify the known ‘God.’ In place of such an epistemology, Musgrave offers ‘clouds of unknowing’ (to borrow a well-known trope) through unpredictably shaped cloud-like patches of colour which open up a space for radical otherness and unknowing.¹⁸

Absence

Musgrave’s second solo exhibition was headed, ‘The Face of the Other,’ this instantly giving rise to connections (albeit unintended, I am informed) with Levinas’ writings on the face and the ethical demands it makes upon us. There are, of course, no figurative depictions of human faces in Musgrave’s paintings, but this only underscores Musgrave’s refusal to objectivise and master the other, in addition to his respect for the unknowability and irreducible value of the other person. In fact, it is through his haunting images of absence that Musgrave most clearly presents the face of the other. For as Marion has pointed out, the face of the other is the most obvious portal to nothingness:

[W]hat do we look at in the face of the other person? Not his or her mouth, nevertheless more expressive of the intentions than other parts of the body, but the eyes – or more exactly the empty pupils of the person’s eyes, their black holes open on the somber ocular hollow. In other words, in the face we fix on the sole place where precisely nothing can be seen. Thus, in the face of the other person we see precisely the point at which all visible spectacle happens to be impossible, where there is nothing to see, where intuition can give nothing [of the] visible.¹⁹

Just as with the face of the other, so in Musgrave’s paintings: from one point of view there is nothing there to see. This at least is how one with little familiarity with or appreciation for abstract art is likely to react to images such as *Ghostly*

¹⁸ I am indebted to Roger Lipsey’s similar analysis of Rothko’s work, in *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1988), pp. 307-20.

¹⁹ Marion, *In Excess*, p. 115.

Lovers (2006) and *Seductress* (2006), which despite the titles they have been given contain little, if any, recognisable forms. The nothingness in these works is therefore an absence, an invisible, but as with the eyes of the other person, this is only an absence of visibility, not an absence *tout court*. If the “black holes” of a person’s eyes can be a gateway to the infinite depths of their soul, then so with Musgrave’s work the absence of any recognisably human or even physical figures merely opens the door to realities that in our hectic day-to-day existence we push as far below the conscious as possible, only for them to resurface with a vengeance at times of unexpected tragedy or unmerited joy.

But there is also a dark side to Musgrave’s absences, particularly in some of his most recent work. In *Poseidon* (2006), for example, the darkness in the depths of the sea envelops any light there is. We seem to be drowning in nothingness and despair. And although there is a more symbiotic relationship between darkness and light in most of Musgrave’s work, as evidenced by *Light in the Darkness* (2006) and especially *Coming Together* (2006), the threat of nothingness is never far away. The stream of evanescent lights we see in *Ancient Temple* (2006) and *Duo* (2005) do not hide the fact that the ascent to the luminous centre is always lined with thorns and crosses: to reach God one must pass through what John of the Cross calls ‘the dark night of the soul,’ a painful experience of the absence of God which loses none of its bite even if the night is eventually swept away by the resplendent rays of the morning.

As with Ad Reinhardt’s series of ‘Black Paintings,’ however, Musgrave’s dark colours are not simply negative. Indeed, they are experienced as both disturbing and revealing, as making something more deeply present, and not merely by being placed in contrast to lighter shades but in and through themselves. Here it is useful to recall what Kevin Hart describes as ‘the dark gaze’ in reference to the work of Maurice Blanchot. In *Thomas l’obscur*, Blanchot’s first novel, the protagonist Thomas loses his sight, and Hart explains that;

The dark that floods into Thomas’s eye at once stops him from seeing in his usual manner and enables him to see the night as it truly is. The night allows Thomas to glimpse its mystery with what I call a dark gaze.²⁰

Musgrave, also, encourages us to adopt such a gaze, “to close [our] eyes, look within and feel deeply enough” as he puts it, to look beyond the seeming emptiness evoked by his dark hues and to perceive the difficult truths that make themselves mysteriously present only through absence. Darkness, but also the non-objective quality of Musgrave’s work in general, thus serve to

²⁰ Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 12.

present a ‘nonabsent absence’, or what Mark C. Taylor has called a ‘disfiguration’ of ordinary forms that affirms as it deforms:

At the limit, something other approaches. Though not precisely unnameable, this other cannot be properly named; though almost unfigurable, this other can be figured only by a certain disfiguring.²¹

What is visible, then, in Musgrave’s paintings does not only reveal, but also conceals – or ‘re-veils,’ as Kevin Hart likes to say²² – an invisibility. For practitioners of the *via negativa*, as mentioned earlier, the purpose of this concealment or hiddenness is to safeguard representations of the divine from degenerating into idols, whether conceptual or visual. But what is overcome is not merely the threat of idolatry, but the very opposition between the visible and the invisible, or transcendence and immanence. In this connection it is worth repeating one of Musgrave’s favourite quotes, a well-known line often attributed to the French poet, Paul Éluard (1895-1952), but which on some accounts goes as far back as the medieval German mystic, Jacob Boehme (1575-1624): “There is another world, but it is within this one.”

This dissolution of the boundaries between the spiritual and the physical, the natural and the supernatural, the sacred and the profane is constantly at work in Musgrave’s paintings. Even in his earlier works, which are often dominated by lines and shapes of an almost geometric structure, there are rarely any sharp points of demarcation: the aptly named *Crossing Over* (2004) illustrates this well. Musgrave’s shadowy patches of colour run into one another, repelling and attracting each other across the canvas, and leaving behind no determinate boundaries. This is particularly the case in more recent works, where the incandescent heat in *Rising Son* (2005), *Seductress* (2005) and *Eternal Flame* (2006) melts away the firm conceptual boundaries we like to use to ‘carve up’ reality according to our needs and interests. Fire, a biblical symbol of God’s presence (as in the burning bush of Exodus 3:2), is a recurring motif in Musgrave’s work, as evidenced by *Red Centre* (2004), *Baptism of Fire* (2005) and *Embers* (2005). But the fires Musgrave lights do not leave behind charred and desolated landscapes, as they do in Anselm Kiefer. Rather, fire works in Musgrave in an alchemical fashion to purge, not base metals, but our very perceptions and conceptions, ridding them of the artificial distinctions to which they are attached.

In the end, Musgrave’s paintings do not simply provoke admiration at, say, the technical virtuosity of the artist, or even fascination and delight in the

²¹ Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 15.

²² See the interview with Kevin Hart in *With Gifted Thinkers*, ed. Mark Manolopoulos (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), pp.75-100.

face of an aesthetically pleasing and captivating use of colour. A physical effect of this sort is certainly evoked. But as Rothko reminded his friend and art critic, Dore Ashton, during one of her periodic visits to the artist's huge New York studio: "They are not pictures."²³ Art in the style of Rothko and Musgrave is not created for entertaining and decorative ends, but for much different purposes. The ultimate aim of such 'iconoclastic icons' is to produce what Kandinsky called "a psychic effect": an inner resonance, whereby the painting touches the soul, perhaps even provoking, silently and gradually, an inward transformation.²⁴ To quote Rothko again,

I'm interested only in expressing 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* those basic human emotions... The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you... are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point!²⁵

Generating such a resonance, particularly today, is no easy thing. But Musgrave's paintings are sure to resonate with the restless and unhinged spirits of our day who are not content with the steady diet of triviality and avarice fed to them by the mass media and consumerist culture. It is, indeed, in a culture such as this that Musgrave's paintings play an important role as intimations (perhaps troubling intimations) of 'something more.' For as one critic has observed, art may well be one of the few avenues we have left for reaching the divine:

The pathways to God have become less clearly marked, some might say, overgrown... There are few who would deny that access to the spiritual or transcendent dimension of life has become increasingly difficult to negotiate – even for adults who have been reared in one of the Christian traditions. I suggest that the aesthetic dimension of reality offers the contemporary secular society one of the very few points of contact with a world in which the spiritual can be appreciated.²⁶

²³ Dore Ashton, *About Rothko* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 155.

²⁴ See Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M.T.H. Sadler (New York: Dover Publications, 1977), p. 24.

²⁵ Quoted in Selden Rodman, *Conversations with Artists* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1961), pp. 93-94, emphasis in the original.

²⁶ Eoin G. Cassidy, 'Pathways to God: Beauty, the Road Less Travelled', in *Neglected Wells: Spirituality and the Arts*, eds Anne M. Murphy and Eoin G. Cassidy (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), p. 11. For further discussion of the connections between spirituality and modern art, see Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*,

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Posiedon 152 x 182cm, oil on canvas, 2006



Light In The Darkness 137 x 182cm, oil on canvas, 2006

and especially the essays in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*, ed. Maurice Tuchman (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986).

I should point out that Musgrave's work has, since this paper was written, undergone some quite significant changes in direction, including a much more varied use of mediums (e.g., charcoal on canvas, ink on paper, sculpture).

Presence and Absence



Ancient Temple 101 x 152cm, oil on canvas, 2006



Rising Son 167 x 167cm, oil on canvas, 2005



Ghostly Lovers 152 x 122cm, oil on canvas, 2005



Crossing Over 137 x 172cm, oil on canvas, 2004