

On an earthquakey day in October 1933 I was born in Santa Monica, California, during a time simplified by the Great Depression. Some of my first drawings were of decrepit cars chauffeured by ghosts and skeletons driving out of flames and into deserts. I tried to buy into the American dream, running along the beaches of Venice, skipping over the wads of tar floating in from oil tankers cleaning their bilges a hundred yards from shore, sand littered with dead birds and sea lions. I surfed, built hot rods, played football, served in student government, cartooned for the school paper and yearbook. Each summer I hitchhiked away, labored as a migratory farm worker in Oregon and Idaho, identified with the hoboes under the bridges.

My father was one of the chief designers for Douglas Aircraft, helped design the DC-3, the Douglas Dauntless and ultimately the X-3. His influence on my art was great: when I asked for drawing paper he gave me graph paper or tracing paper, taught me how to print impeccably, how to fill the colors inside the lines, but still I scribbled, wearing through boxes of crayons, off the paper and onto the walls and floor. My real artistic influence was the Sunday funnies and my technique was high physical exuberance. I worked briefly at Douglas on the X-3 and the DC-6 and went to Cal Poly to study aeronautical engineering, though it soon became apparent my primary interest was in the esthetics of flight and not in the engineering which seemed to demand an absolute faith in numbers. I dropped out of Cal Poly and was drafted into the Army.

After infantry basic training I was shipped to Korea, where I observed the sturdy and resilient people repairing their farms over and over again as we marched through destroying

everything in our path. I became a confirmed pacifist when faced with the devastation, the racism, the cruelty of that horrible war. I crawled on my belly out of camp and lived with the peasants in their terrible poverty, learning their history, their art and their spirit. Whenever I could arrange it I flew to Japan and disappeared into that culture too, living in remote parts of the country where, in spite of the Second World War, the people had never seen a person like me. I embraced the art of calligraphy and the wood-block print which combined a high esthetic sense with a quality of cartoon, great precision with spontaneity.

My hatred for the military and for conformity brought a determination to never be controlled again by my government or anyone else, to make all my own decisions henceforth, to become educated, well-traveled, courageous and an artist. Upon discharge I moved to Mexico, having trouble accepting any of the motivating factors of my own culture. I studied the revolutionary muralists, dreamed of justice and equality, discovered Frida Kahlo's transcendent self-portraits, found the Aztecs, the Mayans, the Tarascans whose Pre-Columbian art also contained caricature and humor. I studied voraciously, got straight A's at City College except in art where, in spite of my prolific output, teachers could not encourage my awful talent. I stopped taking art, painted in my little pension room, covering my walls with atrocious beginnings. One North American friend, the poet John Ryan, encouraged me to leave Mexico and study at Cal Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute).

The GI Bill, well-earned I always thought, allowed me the freedom to pick any course of study, to satiate my hunger for learning without regard for practical results. I sweated going

to art school, imagined some effete academy where they'd try to teach me to render from Greek plaster casts, but the day I arrived and entered the courtyard I saw two bearded characters wearing Mexican huaraches playing bongo drums and I felt instant relief. Peter Forakis and Leo Valledor became life-long friends, took me to their gallery, "The Six," in which I saw work that swept all my fears away. I met with Elmer Bischoff, head of the painting department, who explained compassionately that the school did not teach thirties social realism and put me in Painting 101. Soon I was sharing Studio 13 with Manuel Neri, Joan Brown, Bill Brown and Forakis. I worked in the school library where each day I would take a different art book home to study and live with. I found Van Gogh, Mondrian, de Kooning and Bosch. I found Sesshu and Hokusai, Tantric mandalas, Gothic rose windows, Aborigine dream-time images and all these discoveries found their way into my work. I tended bar in North Beach at "The Place" which brought me into the thrilling bohemian life.

After painting every which way, enjoying the freedom to explore any esthetic, I began to study with the powerful painter and teacher, Frank Lobdell, and decided to listen to him fully, moved into the same building on Mission and Embarcadero, an historic and very funky artists' space where rents were fifteen dollars a month. I poured myself into the West Coast version of abstract expressionism, thick and dark, scraped and layered images with the "Myth of Sisyphus" as a theme; these hard, tormented canvases were my boulder to push endlessly. I thrived surrounded by artists and poets, continued to show at the Six and later the Batman Gallery, all black and angst. After receiving a BFA and MFA at the school, I taught for a couple of years and began getting nervous that I would settle down so I packed off to New York.

The first loft that I rented in '61 was next door to Mark di Suvero whom I had met in California. Mark had suffered a very severe accident but had learned to work vigorously in spite of his pain and served as an inspiration to many artists who often gathered in his fish market studio to argue and play chaotic music on his sculpture. Another California friend, Chuck Ginnever, kept a truck which we all worked with, delivering art from lofts to galleries and museums, giving me a service entrance view of the profession.

In '62 I moved to the Washington vegetable market area of downtown, on the site of the future World Trade Center. There I had an empty building which I soon filled with friends from the west: Forrest Myers, Tamara Melcher, Patsy Krebs, Leo Valledor and Mary Leahy. We gathered so often to see each other's work and play our own version of free jazz, fired by the sounds of Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane, we decided to take over the burnt-out top fifth floor to make a gallery. With Forakis, Edwin Ruda, Robert Grosvenor, Tony Magar, di Suvero and many other friends we started the Park Place Gallery, named for the street of our building. For a couple of years we had continuous group shows bringing together dozens of unknown downtown artists with none of the hesitations a commercial gallery might have.

With all the ferment and new ideas I was able to go through major transformations in my own work, moving away from some of the less personally meaningful influences of Lobdell and the West Coast scene and toward my own earlier background in the esthetics of geometry and the grid. I had always used colors of the highest contrast—primaries, complementaries and black and white which continued unabated in the new hard-edged imagery which was inspired by some of Jung's

theories and by P.D. Ouspensky's Tertium Organum in which artists search for the non-visual Fourth Dimension. Ouspensky said all artists' works are analogies for God which I liked very much.

I was offered a teaching job in Pittsburgh at Carnegie Tech (now the Carnegie-Mellon Institute) and moved there in '63 with Patsy Krebs, finding a studio in the South Side across from J&L Steel in a Serbian steelworker ghetto. The emphasis at the school was on Joseph Albers' color studies and the courses of the Ulm School of Design, Germany's new Bauhaus, which fit in very well with my own research. I showed regularly at the school and at Westinghouse Laboratories where my successes with engineers brought me full circle from my "aero" days.

With backpacks full of drawing books and gouache, Patsy and I took my savings and hopped a Yugoslavian freighter to Tangier, where we discovered amazing geometries everywhere we looked. The Koran forbid Muslim artists from using representation so their artistic longings often focused on elaborate grids. Now the challenge was to bring additional meaning to the work, to put some spirit into it that would at least be more vital than the patterns on our hotel room floor. We hitchhiked slowly across North Africa, crossing the Sahara desert in mid-summer with the help of wandering Bedouin and arrived in Egypt with books full of studies that demanded to be painted large. After a month in Port Said waiting for a freighter to India, the Monsoon season defeated us and we sailed instead to Greece and made our way to Lesbos, where we moved into a fine old empty ten- room house in Papados and proceeded to paint grids of prismatic Mediterranean light. Months later we rolled up our canvases and carried them on our backs through Rome, Paris, London and Dublin, finally

missing our New York City and taking a Norwegian freighter home.

Back in New York I found our gallery had continued to show in various venues but the group was ready to expand. With the help of collector-backers J. Patrick Lannan, Vera List, Virginia Dwan, Betty Blake Guiberson and Virginia Murchison, with whom we traded work for rent and expenses, we found a large storefront on West Broadway near Houston and started the first gallery in SoHo and the biggest gallery in the city at that time to accommodate the very large work of our sculptors and most of the painters too. We continued to have group shows in which each of the ten members went out and found three unknown artists, bringing together combinations of esthetics that totally defied interpretation. On other months one painter and one sculptor would exhibit together, and we often held concerts, conferences and anti-war rallies. Painters David Novros, Jon Baldwin and Gay Gladding joined the group. Our emphasis was on public art and performance, alternative approaches to the art and life from the strictly economic concerns of other galleries. We had the money and the will to take radical chances and that was our source of joy.

My own work continued to get larger and simpler with the strongest contrasts possible, parallelograms that appeared to move dynamically through space and always in defiance of objective reality. Soon the work was too large and powerful to remain on canvas. Separate panels of porcelainized steel in primary colors were applied to the exterior walls of buildings or planted in various ways in the natural landscape in an effort to combine harmoniously ultimately human shapes and colors with organic forms and hues.

In 1966, while traveling across country with Jon Baldwin and composer Steve Reich, I attended a Ute Indian Sundance in Ignacio, Colorado whose spiritual power so changed my life that all things needed reconsideration. The anti-Vietnam war effort was becoming increasingly consuming, it seemed the art ought to be more directly in the service of politics. At the same time the gallery was becoming successful and hence more like any other gallery; we were becoming defined and co-opted. Meanwhile, the message of the Sundance was to return to nature, to live the life according to the highest of ideals, to be an alternative model of peace, harmony and simplicity, to devote the art to the spirit and thanksgiving.

In 1967 I moved with my young wife Linda to the Rocky Mountains to start a community of artists. After months of searching we found 360 acres on the south side of Greenhorn Mountain at 9,000 feet elevation overlooking the Huerfano Valley and the Sangre de Cristo range beyond. We called our land Libre ("Free" in Spanish) and went to work finding out what that could mean. We built our own houses, grew our own food, delivered our children and followed our bliss. Which is not to say that it was not enormously difficult. Poverty and isolation weighed heavily on us. For myself I missed the eyes who watched my work.

Primary panels in the wilderness landscape became my dedication, often encompassing spaces of a half a mile with ten or more panels making dotted lines through piñon and juniper hills, using the brightest colors and largest shapes in the distance to visually contradict the receding land. I was not able to exhibit this work anywhere else, was not able even to photograph it adequately; most of the pieces could only be seen from one exact spot which I would mark with a little flag

and which required a pilgrimage even to find. Walking about familiarized me with the mountain, brought me to a point where I no longer wanted to upset the patterns of nature with all my fluorescent colors.

In 1970 NASA held a conference in Robert Irwin's studio in Venice with the subject of habitability, attempting to understand the problem facing astronauts in future space stations. They had the wit to invite artists and poets to broaden their perspectives and I was asked to give a talk not only as an artist but a builder of community. During my lecture I mentioned other communities around the world including one that poets Gary Snyder and Nanao Sakaki started in Japan. The outcome was that NASA sponsored a trip for me to Japan to study the movement there. The Buzoku (tribe) had properties in the mountains and valleys, north and south, exactly one day's hitchhike apart. Linda and our daughter Lia joined me in Kyoto and we visited them all, including the most spectacular, Suwanose Island, an active little volcano in the East China Sea. I studied calligraphy, met many fine artists from Kyushu to Hokkaido, and made a few tentative efforts at landscapes.

Home again at Libre I painted inside: shaped panels depicting the five elements as I had experienced them in Nippon—Earth, Air, Fire, Water and "Mu," the Void, the Akasha, Emptiness. I went on retreat, thought I had given up everything, and then our little daughter died. I had not begun to know Mu until then.

I traveled aimlessly through Mexico, Guatemala, Central America, spending Christmas in poor Managua when Somoza was still in power. Finally in Panama, waiting for a boat to South America, I knew I had to get hold of myself, act like an

artist, begin to paint again. Everything I ever believed was out the window but painting was a meditation and I knew I could find myself in it. The first paintings were circles, little seeds and beans that seemed to be the first beings, the beginnings. When I reached Ecuador I was determined to stop traveling, find a studio and get to work. I met a man in Quito who was the caretaker of an abandoned mission where I could find empty buildings in which to work. When I got to the mission church exactly on the equator 10,000 feet up in the alteplano surrounded by majestic snow-capped Andes, I saw a primitive painting on the outside wall of Jesús farming and the name, "El Sembrador," the sower of seeds, and all the seeds he threw looked like my paintings so I stayed there and worked for a year until my heart was healed enough to return to Libre. In Picaquí I worked with the Otavalo Indians designing rugs for the weavers and the sales kept us alive. Back in Colorado I followed my circles into Tantric Art-inspired cosmic germs and spheres again searching for that perfect analogy for God.

Libre was thriving when I returned, artists were coming and going at all times, writers, potters, weavers, gardeners, mechanics, tree-planters, sculptors and painters were working away, houses were going up and falling down regularly. In the '70s I used fabric dyes and acrylic medium to achieve vibrant layers of transparent colors which was an unfortunate nihilism in that large bodies of work simply faded away. I worked in grids again, verticals and horizontals with the idea of palimpsest in mind: the ability to read the writing underneath, to see the activities of the painting from the first lines on bare canvas to the final layers fifty strokes later, to allow the process to be the meaning, with high contrast in tone and value.

Our son was born in 1974 at Libre. We named him Luz for the

light he brings to our life.

I weaned myself from the dyes whose use I learned among the Andeans and suddenly there was a rush of the Japanese again as I painted large iron oxide black strokes with a sailor's mop on bare canvas. I wanted a calligraphy that was no one's previous language but found that very hard to do; every stroke was a character in some culture's vocabulary. I moved into paintings of one large stroke, painting on the floor with thick pigment and a broken bamboo rake, almost Zen sand gardening. These works transformed into Native American-inspired Medicine Wheels of the four directions, usually red, yellow, black and white.

San Francisco and New York continued to be my preferred cities in which to exhibit, teach, and sometimes keep a studio. Also Denver, Taos and Santa Fe were supportive from time to time. In '81 I took a loft in Red Hook, Brooklyn and painted a series of dynamic works with flat, bright colors thrusting in lightning-bolt shapes. I called them "Salsa" paintings because, in my Puerto Rican neighborhood, that is what I listened to all day every day of the week and it was the energy of the dance that commanded the work.

After showing the work in SoHo I returned to my mountain and faced one of the biggest changes of my art life. I always wanted to be free to follow any direction that came to my heart yet I had painted for almost thirty years only abstract images. For almost twenty years I had been surrounded by the most beautiful of natural landscapes yet never had the courage to translate the thrill of the daily view into painting. As I had done since childhood, I took myself as subject and painted a series of self-portraits each with a different aspect.

With comrades I had marched on Washington against the invasion of Grenada and had been actively supporting the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, many that I met in the '70s. My art life seemed scattered all to hell and so I packed up to go to Central America and fight against the contras, not a very sound idea for a pacifist of fifty-two years. When I reached Mexico I connected with several Nicaraguans who quickly talked me out of such a misadventure saying the average age in their country was fifteen and they definitely did not want an old gringo teaching them how to make their revolutionary murals.

I stayed on in Yelapa, Jalisco, Mexico on the Pacific coast. The portraits became local indios and mestizos and eventually faces of all the races of the world, and for that time those were my analogies. For five years I traveled back and forth between the mountains and the sea while the paintings took on figures and symbols, magic and mystery with landscapes appearing behind, kind of New Age, channeling strangeness, exploring areas I'd never dreamed of, Don Juan fantasies of flying shaman and naked Venuses. At last I let the mountains be the painting leaving out all the fanciful notions and visual anarchies and what a relief it was to just deal with the view from my window.

At first the mountain-scapes were fairly literal. I didn't want to offend the spirits I had gotten to know so well. But then I realized the spirits didn't look so much like the surface of the mountain and I was able to let the painting take over, to let all of the investigations of my abstract years come into play—the grids, the transparencies, the spontaneous brush strokes, the caricaturization, the high contrasts, the impossible spaces, all in the mountain, of the mountain, the way the mountain is made geologically, atmospherically, spiritually.

With my companion, Sibylla, from the Black Forest, Germany, I have traveled to Germany, Holland, France, Belgium, Switzerland and Spain, devouring the great works in the museums and thrilling to the ever-changing landscapes which I would sketch and then paint large at Libre.

As a long-time member of Greenpeace and a former tar-surfer from Venice (which I left in '51 thinking my home was hopelessly polluted, and they hadn't even invented the freeway yet!) I have always been ecologically aware. I paint no signs of humanity in my landscapes. I dream of a better time when people could love the earth and the sky and all the beings therein. I cherish the vigor and the rigor, the storm and the calm, the pain and the pleasure of this short life. These paintings are my way of giving thanks.

This essay, now slightly revised, first appeared in Dean Fleming: The Energy of Nature, curated by David Turner (Colorado Springs: The Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, 1998). For additional information, see Reimagining Space: The Park Place Gallery Group in 1960s New York, curated by Linda Dalrymple Henderson (Austin, TX: Blanton Museum of Art, 2008); and Claudine Humblet, The New American Abstraction, 1950-1970 (Milan: Skira, 2007), vol. 3, pp. 1939-75.