

CONCEALED REVEALMENT

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With our very lips we construct barriers, words upon words and systems upon systems, and place them in front of the darkness to conceal it; but then our bails immediately begin to dig at those barriers, in an attempt to open the smallest of windows, the tiniest of cracks, through which we may gaze for a single moment at that which is on the other side. But alas, vain is in the labor of man! At the very moment when the crack is apparently opened—another barrier, the shape of a new word or system, suddenly stands in the place of the old, shutting off the view again.¹

A couple of years ago, I was introduced to the concept of Concealment and Revealment within the context of a Jewish thought class. The concept illustrates the idea of a push-pull relationship, a constant flux in awareness of one's relationship with a higher power, with God. As an observant Jew living in a secular world, I am aware of the tensions that arise in trying to find a balance between lifestyles and cultures that have differing and sometimes opposing values, morals, and ideals. Through the concept of Concealment and Revealment, I have gained a new perception in my approach to understanding the balance of the tensions of life.

The constant flux in relationship with God is not simply a matter of figuring how to combine the secular with the religious, but a matter of understanding how we as physical beings can be elevated through our spirituality to a level of spiritual beings. A fundamental belief within Judaism is that we are created in the image of God. Our spirit embodies God's essence.² Yet, we exist in a physical, tangible world, preventing us from living in a state of constant spirituality. At times, I feel as if my soul is trapped within the physical vessel of my body struggling to find balance between the polarities of spirituality and physicality.

I incorporate these tensions within my work through explorations of other opposing forces: chaos and order; clarity and doubt; light and dark; love and fear. *Concealed Revealment*

¹ Bialik, H. N. "Revealment and Concealment in Language," in *Modern Hebrew Literature*, edited by Robert Alter. New York: Behrman House, 1975, pp. 127-135.

² "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them." *Genesis 1:27*

is intended to be a record of my meditative process that provides viewers with an opportunity to contemplate their own means of exploration and introspection.

I rely on the media of watercolor and gunpowder to explore these contrasting forces in hopes of finding balance. Painting with watercolor and gunpowder enables me to discover the dynamic relation between control and uncertainty. I control the placement of paint on the paper, but, once on the paper, the paint acts on its own accord establishing new paths. When the paint interacts with the gunpowder medium, spontaneous reactions occur; the media comes to life; new textures form; crystallization appears. The paper I use is made of plastic. This enables the paint to sit atop the paper instead of soaking into the paper, allowing the fluids to flow into each other. Because of the fluidity, the media puddles together, erasing evidence of paintbrush strokes—the human hand involved. This removal of the human touch arouses a sense of mystery and ambiguity provoking the viewer to think beyond his own human experience.

The mysterious qualities of gunpowder and water are what attracted me to incorporate gunpowder into my watercolors. They are both spontaneous, fluid materials with minds of their own. Yet these somewhat random interactions between the watercolors and gunpowder create a balanced image as they form a new relationship by flowing into one another. They represent the natural elements of water and fire finding harmony within nature. Water is a constant flow of ideas; fire is the spark and passion that inspires and ignites ideas.

The natural movement of life – the patterns within nature – inspires me and is very much reflected through my works. I find myself sharing a strong connection to water and finding comfort in its personality. However, sometimes I become too comfortable with water and need the gunpowder to excite my work and reinvigorate my process. The textures formed from these elements make me believe that my works are alive and breathing.

Throughout this project, I have collected inspiration from several artists whose sensibilities I wish to reflect in my own work. These artists – Cai Guo-Qiang, Pat Steir, and Sophie Jodoin – utilize themes and elements that have heavily influenced my artistic style and process.

Cai Guo-Qiang works with many materials and media, but his gunpowder drawings are what excite me (see figure 1). There is an absolute sense of control and chaos – when he draws with the gunpowder to the spontaneous moments from the ignition and combustion of the powder. His work is driven by the idea that that beauty can be found anywhere, even in something as raw and dark as gunpowder – a concept that resonates deep within my sensibilities. Aside from the similarities of incorporating gunpowder into my works, albeit our different processes, I find his motivations to be completely arousing, inspiring me to make beautiful works.

Pat Steir’s work drew me in through the immense movement felt from her paintings. I feel as if I am free falling into her waterfalls when I look at them (I can only imagine experiencing the works in real life instead of through photographs). The freedom in her “brush strokes” evokes a mysterious quality that questions how the painting was made (see figure 2). I mentioned this quality earlier as something I hope to achieve in my own paintings.

Sophie Jodoin paints evocatively striking works. Her figures are so hauntingly beautiful. They linger in a dimension that seems to be beyond time and space. They are not solid or grounded but appear to be somewhat erased as if vanishing (see figure 3). There is a curiosity that holds me in compelling me to do anything but look away – a connection I aspire to achieve for my viewers.

I feel as if my entire life I have been collecting inspiration through everything and anything in hopes that it will all bubble up into some marvelous masterpiece. While I've gained valuable insights and knowledge from all of my collected inspiration and experiences, I think the most important lesson I learned through the Integrative Project is that, ultimately to make art, I need to just do. Create. Make something and learn from my explorations. So this is how I began.

My first works were entirely exploration based. I would paint and observe. I needed to understand the interactions between the watercolor and gunpowder and between the media and the paper (see figure 4). I was learning an entirely new vocabulary because I had never worked with gunpowder as a painting medium, only mark-making through burning. It was crucial that I allowed myself the time and opportunity to explore.

However, as I was developing these explorations, the work started feeling void and empty. I lacked satisfaction in completing pieces because works were happening too fast. I know I said I want the medium to speak for itself, but I felt too far removed from the art being formed as if I were not the one painting, making decisions regarding the final composition. I questioned how to gain more control over the work. I decided to integrate abstracted figures into the paintings (see figure 5). Having never worked so abstract before, the figures allowed an easier transition into the world of abstract. They created a stronger connection between my work and myself. I felt as if I were back in control.

I initially thought that the figures were the perfect metaphor for the relationship between physicality and spirituality that I was trying to work out. They provided a more intimate, personal context embodying our inner conflicts, yet form a community illustrating the need to connect within the context of a larger universe. Soon, though, the figures started to seem too literal and too obvious. The mysterious quality that I strived for was disappearing in these works.

Meanwhile, I had started working larger scale. These works now demanded more time, which allowed for more thought in the pieces and, in turn, more satisfaction when completed (see figure 6). I decided to return to the abstract landscapes – large scale this time.

At this point, I was more comfortable working abstract because of my developed understanding of the relationship between the watercolors and gunpowder. I returned to the abstract landscapes with a newfound confidence. I find new discoveries within the paintings, and working large scale allowed for more investment in the pieces initiating a more connected relationship between the paintings and myself.

Throughout this process, I have grappled with two issues: first, finding balance on an individual level – seeking clarity within myself; second, finding harmony in relationships with others – seeking balance among varying individual universes. These issues have manifested themselves in *Concealed Revealment*, a series of paintings, extracting from both my abstract landscapes and figurative paintings, culminating in a work that succeeds what those previous paintings failed to do: simultaneously confront the viewer in an intimate and universal realm.

The landscape quality is intended to invite the viewer to explore and reflect. The paintings are abstract swirls and splatters of dark and light, black, gray and color. Standing in front of these landscapes, viewers find themselves small and insignificant in comparison to the overwhelming expanse before them, acknowledging that the universe is greater than the individual being. It is my intention that upon closer inspection the viewer will find the smaller moments within the larger work. The moment of interaction between the watercolors and gunpowder create reactions unable to explain and textures that seem too enigmatic to have been created by a paintbrush. Through these moments of connection and excitement within the painting, the viewer can be comforted by the large expanse.

The paintings are oriented vertically as opposed to the expected horizontal orientation for landscapes (see figure 7). The paintings stand at seven feet tall and are approximately eighteen inches across, similar to the width of a person's chest. This orientation compels the viewer to confront the painting as a fellow being. The large expanse of world is now focused within the framework of human relationships. On an individual level, we can grapple with our own existence and our place within this world, but there is a major shift involved when we begin relating our existence to other individuals. Through this orientation, the concept becomes accessible while maintaining allusiveness about these relationships in focus. I am no longer creating abstracted universes but universes within the body. The orientation allows the watercolors and gunpowder to flow into one another and alludes to energy flows among human beings.

Again, it was my intention through these paintings – its abstract nature yet relatable landscape quality and vertical orientation – to create the atmosphere by which the viewer can explore the tension I have wrestled most heavily in my life. I have been guided to understand the world in the context of my relationship with God. Through the years, I have experienced both great closeness and great distance from Him. Over the past years as I live my life beyond the bubble of my family and childhood community, the instability of this relationship has become more apparent to me. Each choice and decision I grapple with has consequences that either bring me closer to or further from God.

I experience moments of heightened awareness and concentrated clarity and moments of darkness and intense doubt. My hope is that as I struggle through these moments of darkness, I am able to recall my moments of clarity to bring light into the darkness and find revelation in

concealment when light is revealed to me. Only through these struggles and challenges can I find greater balance and harmony between these opposing physical and spiritual worlds.

The philosopher Martin Buber describes this dichotomy through an object-subject relationship that he refers to using the word pairs “I-It” and “I-You.”³ “The basic word of I-You can only be spoken with one’s whole being. The basic word I-It can never be spoken with one’s whole being.”⁴ Man is constantly striving to reach God, in attempts to attain a true relationship, a oneness with God. To obtain an I-You relation, we must overcome our sense of boundaries, of time and space, of objectivity. “Every You in the world is doomed by its nature to become a thing or at least to enter into thinghood again and again.”⁵ We must continually go back and forth through the experiences of I-It and I-You to create spiritual balance.

Similarly, it was imperative to my process that I went back and forth between my subject matter in order to achieve satisfaction in my final works. This wrestling was paramount to finding satisfaction and gratification in my paintings. If not for the struggle, I would have no desire to ask questions or find answers. It was the driving force that pushed my explorations to lead me to creating a series that successfully executes my thoughts and concepts in a series of paintings—*Concealed Revelation* (see figure 8).

Concealed Revelation is intended to provoke the viewer with an opportunity to interact with my work in the way that I created them – as a series of meditative processes getting at the tension that exists between the physical and the spiritual, the soul and the body, the light and the dark. I find that in most moments our words fall short of expressing that which is truth and end up creating barriers that prevent us from experiencing true light. Therefore, honest reflection and

³ Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. Pg 55

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.* pg 69

meditation triumphs in a way that words fail. These paintings are my expression of that tension and the meditation that is demanded by it.

Figure 1:

Cai Guo-Qiang's *Chaos in Nature*, gunpowder on canvas, Los Angeles, 2012



Figure 2:

Pat Steir's *Foss*, oil on canvas, 1993



Figure 3:

Sophie Jodoin's *Fallen* (a series), conte crayon on mylar, 2006



Figure 4:

My explorations: *Four Worlds*, 8.5" x 11" watercolor and gunpowder on yupo paper, 2011

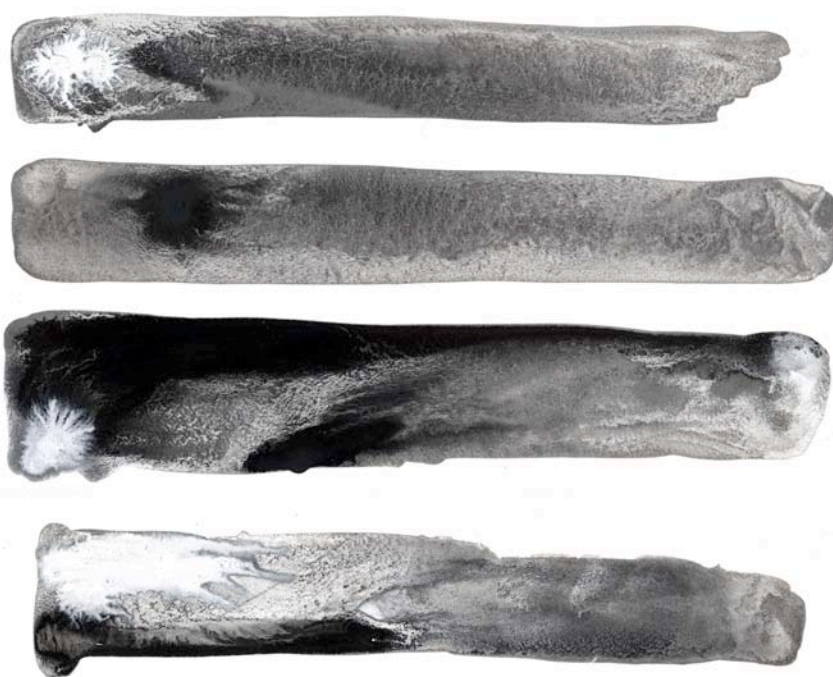


Figure 5:

Exploring the figure: *Formations*, 8.5" x 11" watercolor and gunpowder on yupo paper



Figure 6:

Large scale figures: *Colorful People*, 3' x 5' (cropped) watercolor and gunpowder on yupo



Figure 7:

Vertical Orientation: *Between Concealments the Void Looms*, 3' x 7' watercolor and gunpowder on Yupo paper



Figure 8:

Concealed Revealmnt series

