

ArcheoInventions

A Critical Introduction to John Oberdorf's Creative Procedures

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The exhibition *ArcheoSpaces* displays a series of paintings and drawings created in the last two decades by Salem-based artist John Oberdorf¹. Through the representation of vast, enigmatic landscapes and the depiction of minute, metamorphic geological formations, these images invite the audience to explore alternative dimensions of reality and access different planes of perception. Conceived as visual metaphors carefully composed in order to stimulate the viewer's curiosity, imagination and memory, these works become potential fields of experiences for the beholder. Captured by the boundless magnitude of silent valleys, intrigued by the ambiguous shapes of indefinable figures or attracted by the stunning vividness of the details that populate these images, the viewer is motivated to contemplate at once, in an almost magical simultaneity, forms that appear immeasurably distant and elements that are represented incredibly close.

Such a well-balanced dilation of space guides, with gentle persuasion, the eyes of the beholder across the painting, inciting the audience to explore every element within these compositions like a sailor in search of the islands described by Melville or Stevenson, or the imaginary lands of conjectures delineated by Jorge Luis Borges. The farthest elements as well as the nearest objects, along with the presence of familiar and mysterious shapes, appear combined in ways that further contribute to expand the multiple

¹ The exhibition *ArcheoSpaces* is displayed in two different locations: a first section, co-curated by David Wilson and Ricardo De Mambro Santos, has been organized by the Salem Art Association in the Bush Barn Art Center (January 18-February 28, 2020); a second section – focusing primarily on John Oberdorf's drawings and preliminary studies related to his activities as a most talented illustrator of sci-fi books, magazines and advertising – has been curated by Ricardo De Mambro Santos, with the collaboration of Jordan DeGelia, at the Willamette University Hatfield Library (January 30-April 30, 2020). The second exhibition has been partly sponsored by the Verda Karen McCracken Young Art Exhibition Funds of the Department of Art History at Willamette University.

temporalities of the visual journey, eliciting a state of mind in the viewer that is capable of directing one's perception towards unknown horizons of knowledge, experience and thoughts.

The act of looking at a painting or a drawing – especially the ones created by John Oberdorf – thus become a path of potential self-exploration. Significantly this process of increased awareness of one's own schemes of perception, interpretation and analysis presents many affinities with what German philosopher Immanuel Kant referred to – in his reflections on the theory of the Sublime – as *comprehensio aesthetica*², that is, “aesthetic understanding.” By using this category, Kant intended to set a paradigm of (not intellectually-driven) apprehension of natural forms whose effectiveness depended, ultimately, on the degree of emotional, psychological interaction between the beholder and the surrounding phenomena of nature, according to a path of observation/comprehension that was no longer based on rational, scientific or cultural premises, but modeled in response to personal, intrinsically subjective ways of constructing one's own perception and definition of reality. In the case of John Oberdorf's creations, fantasy and matter, mystery and revelation become the indissoluble points of convergence in which the eyes of the beholder – guided through the pictorial space – can bring together and conciliate the unimaginable magnitude of fading landscapes with the minute materiality of rocks, totems and objects, orchestrating an itinerary of visual apprehension that is based on the juxtaposition of time and space, personal projections and collective myths.

It is possible to suggest therefore that, more than final destinations or self-contained narratives, the works created by John Oberdorf offer themselves to the viewer as metaphorical gates, visual portals, wide open windows facing uncharted territories, disclosed toward inexhaustible semantic forests in the attempt to stimulate the audience to escape from any clichés or commonplaces and explore, on the contrary, new, possibly more personal dimensions of experience, beyond what has been already codified and disseminated through the forms of a collective system of knowledge, social practices or shared beliefs. Clefs of vision, the images composed by the artist – like maps of

² Makkreel, Rudolf. “Imagination and Temporality in Kant's Theory of the Sublime.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 3 (1984): 303-315.

untraceable yet fascinating lands – perform the functions of question marks, raising doubts in the viewer while, simultaneously, eliciting individual reflections on themes such as life, memory, loss, hope, desire. “I ask questions,” asserts in fact the painter in an unpublished statement, “and provide windows into other worlds: worlds of the possible.”

A graduate of Oregon State University with a degree in Art and a minor in Anthropology, John Oberdorf began his career creating illustrations – in a style that echoed closely but intelligently the visual vocabulary of a master of the caliber of Frank Frazetta³ – working for publishers such as Ace Books and other magazines specialized in sci-fi stories. His imagination, however, was not fulfilled by those enterprises, given the restrictive nature of this typology of visual narratives, in which images are inevitably subordinated to the coordinates prescribed by the genre or dictated by the particular story the artist was working on. Soon enough, John Oberdorf noticed that his capacity of elaborating “worlds of the possible” – to quote the artist’s words – reached a point of creative saturation and paralyzing predictability. Realizing, moreover, that “the landscape surrounding the people became more interesting to me than the figures they were supporting,”⁴ the painter’s career took a decisive turn from that moment on, moving toward the creation of autonomous iconographies represented within more articulated, evocative and remarkably vast pictorial spaces, further exploring certain atmospheres and tones associated with the poetics of Romanticism and, more specifically, with the concept of the Sublime.

Freed from the constraints of merely illustrative practices, inherently subsidiary to the texts they refer to, the images subsequently elaborated by John Oberdorf revealed an increasingly personal working procedure, whose distinctive features were no longer attached to the limits of any particular genre or borrowed from previous sets of signs, symbols and codes, but nurtured by the artist’s own memories (especially from the period when he was living in Panama as a child⁵) and reinvigorated by his passion for History, Archeology and Anthropology (mainly focused on narrative related to ancient, mythic or

³ On the production of this talented and highly prolific illustrator see, for instance, Frazetta, Frank and Ballantine, Betty. *The Fantastic Art of Frank Frazetta*. New York: Rufus Publications, 1978.

⁴ Rudowski, Christa. “Artistic Visions: Exploring Reality with John Oberdorf.” *Brntwd Magazine* (October 2001): 44.

⁵ On the centrality of those experiences as a child in John Oberdorf’s career as a painter see the comments reported in Rudowski, Christa. “Artistic Visions: Exploring Reality with John Oberdorf.” *Brntwd Magazine* (October 2001): 44.

lost civilizations⁶). Looking at the remotest past, the artist seemed more comfortable to construct – or acknowledge – his closest self. While his heart may have been in Atlantis, his mind was definitely projected into a timelessness future.

In this process of inward-immersion and self-definition as an artist a significant role was played by John Oberdorf's exposure to subjects, ideas and iconographies connected to the Romantic tradition, as one may see in works by painters such as Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) and Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947), or in the images created by masters active in America like Thomas Cole (1801-1848) and Sanford Robinson Gifford (1823-1880). As scholar Andrew Wilton remarks, in the depiction of landscapes constructed in accordance with Romantic stances, "the imagination has an important part to play in our perception of what is immense, nebulous, beyond exact description."⁷ Accordingly, the idea of raising one's mind from the empirical observation of nature to the intuition of higher grounds of reality becomes a central pursuit among Romantic artists. "Even topographical landscapes," sustains in fact Wilton, "might be spectacular in such a way that visitors were moved to a more elevated contemplation of the world."⁸

In the case of John Oberdorf's paintings and drawings it should come as no surprise that these images are often arranged according to very high lines of the horizon, if not seen from a bird's eye view perspective as though the beholder were literally suspended in the air, physically occupying the metaphorical position of the painter's "floating" imagination. By following the premises of this suggestive dialogue with the past, in a most productive form of creative anachronism, John Oberdorf reinterprets the vagueness of the landscapes, the evocative scenarios, the numinous mood and atmospheres explored by Romantic artists, adopting, with particular consistency, the evanescent luminosity of scenes that

⁶ It is rather instructive, in that regard, to take a look at John Oberdorf's favorite readings. His personal library displays in fact an impressive number of publications – sometimes richly illustrated – devoted to the topics mentioned above. To provide a few examples, it suffices to mention a the following titles: Donnelly, Ignatius. *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882; Donnelly, Ignatius. *Ragnarok: The Age of Fire and Gravel*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1883; Warren, William. *Paradise Found. The Cradle of the Human Race at the North Pole. A Study of the Prehistoric World*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1898; Brown, Lillian Mabel Alice Roussel. *Unknown Tribes, Uncharted Seas*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1925.

⁷ Wilton, Andrew and Barringer, Tim. *American Sublime. Landscape Painting in the United States: 1820-1880*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002: 13.

⁸ Wilton (2002): 15.

echo – and poetically update – the disquieting, yet intriguing, topographies created by the masters of the Sublime.

As a philosophical and art-related category, the Sublime emphasizes the subjective perception of reality and stresses, at the same time, its proximity to the realms of imagination as an essential component of the aesthetic experience, since it gives prominence to that feeling “of being overwhelmed by a sense of something incomprehensible, or incommensurable, or more powerful than we are,” as scholar Jane Forsey pointed out⁹, qualifying such a sentiment of temporary displacement as the very essence of art as a form of expression, as a journey of self-discovery for both artists and spectators. The (outward) contemplation becomes the main path for an (inward) exploration.

By linking the external reality to the internal processes through which a perceived object may become part of someone’s memory, the concept of Sublime entails an existential crescendo from the registration of outside data to their psychological transformation within one’s mind. According to these premises, while admiring the astonishing vastness of the world, one comes to realize the even more stunning amplitude of human imagination, thanks to which it is possible in fact to think about – and, consequently, to mentally conceive and inventively formulate – other hypothetical realities, other universes of sense and experience, beyond the one generally called “Reality.” In other words, the path of the Sublime makes one aware of the physical limits of perception while emphasizing the limitless power of imagination. As Forsey put it, “to be made aware of the limitations of our cognitive capacities is at the same time to transcend them, insofar as we reflect on them.”¹⁰ No wonder, then, if the category of the Sublime had been already defined by Kant as the “capacity for thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense. Hence [...] the Sublime is not to be looked for in the things of nature, but in our own ideas.”¹¹ Coherently, one could claim that the Sublime is an interpretive category that does not aim at describing any particular morphology or specific phenomena, but refers to the range of emotional responses and

⁹ Forsey, Jane. “Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 4 (2007): 382.

¹⁰ Forsey (2007): 382.

¹¹ Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*, 1790, trans. James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928: 97.

psychological reactions that the beholder may express – or be affected by – during the process of interaction with nature *sub species comprehensio aesthetica*, that is to say, on the basis of an aesthetic – instead of rational or scientific – understanding of reality.

In their enigmatic ambiguity, suspended between longing and hope, expectation and nostalgia, the works elaborated by John Oberdorf pursue the traces left by the masters of the Sublime, creating their own distinctive modes of expression both from a stylistic as well as iconographic standpoint. Persuasive and elusive, tangible yet ungraspable, the images elaborated by the Salem-based artist set in fact, before the eyes of the viewer, a most mesmerizing paradox: painted with remarkable meticulousness and selective attention to details, these compositions present very naturalistic depictions of totally invented worlds, giving concrete shapes to imaginary settings, sights and sites, in which totemic emerging figures, mysterious presences and dissolving distances are fused together in the making of a highly visionary – and yet resoundingly mimetic – visual narrative.

Now and then, here and there, far and near become interchangeable elements within John Oberdorf's creative cosmos. Furthermore, by revisiting the complex relationship between collective myths and personal memories, the artist codifies a most intimate cartography of feelings and recurrent metaphors, refraining, however, to adopt any didactic symbolism: deep valleys, eroded rocks, human-shaped mountains, geometric planes appear as *ArcheoSpaces* surrounded by the haziness of an exquisitely rendered aerial perspective. In these paintings and drawings, even the most familiar form appears under a new light, reshaped or reinterpreted in a ceaseless process of iconic as well as hermeneutic metamorphosis. This explains why some of the images elaborated by the artist seem to suggest the existence of a subtle bridge between the lyrical pursuits of Romanticism and the deconstructive methods adopted by Surrealist masters: seen from different angles and perceived according to an unpredictable set of expectations, John Oberdorf's works play with the very notion of familiarity in the attempt to transform crystalized codes into opener signs, connecting ambiguous signifiers with variable meanings, thus creating thought-provoking visual compositions that stimulate (intellectual, emotional) experiences that may, in turn, elicit potential paths of (psychological, cultural) reflections.

Set in motion by this constant process of reinterpretation, the act of painting implies the very action of seeing, presenting the latter as a paradigmatic model for poetic inquiries, during which one may question not only the (multilayered, mysterious) realities depicted in John Oberdorf's images but, more importantly, Reality itself. "The way I express myself," asserts the artist, "is in the form of asking visual questions [and] presenting visual enigmas to people so that I don't beat them over the head with a stick in terms of trying to provide an answer, but I let them ask the same questions that I ask."¹² Thus conceived, art becomes a powerful mode of aesthetic investigation, a form of personal reassessment of commonly shared parameters of perception, knowledge and cultural points of reference. Through their compelling naturalism and enigmatic narratives, John Oberdorf's works offer a refuge for Doubt, Curiosity and Mystery: the very gates of creativity. The fusion of past, present and future permeates these images as a reflection on the various ways in which signs and symbols adopted by different civilizations – some of which may appear now incoherent, incomprehensible, unreadable – have attempted to visually translate the otherwise vague contents of the collective as well as the personal memory. Vision and reality appear indissolubly mixed in this stunning *corpus* of paintings and drawings, offering new latitudes of unsolved – and unsolvable – enigmas for the beholder to look at and reflect upon so that one may escape from the paralyzing boundaries of common places and the banality of territories already charted *ad nauseam*.

For this reason (and in line with a distinctively Romantic motif), John Oberdorf's images often depict a little, nearly imperceptible figure – a wanderer, a traveler, a contemplating shadow? – standing and staring in front of the solemn vastness of these cosmic landscapes, or *ArcheoSpaces*, in which it is visually – as well as conceptually – impossible to distinguish between naturally-shaped geological formations and man-made signs such as hieroglyphics or petroglyphs. Presented as a totem among totems, a mystery among mysteries, these almost invisible characters seem to mimic the very act of contemplation expected from the actual beholder, raising the experience of the gaze into an authentically existential model of knowledge, so that the eyes of the viewer, while facing the immensity of these horizons, may grasp – at least intuitively – one of the essential secrets of life: the illusory distance that separates experience from memory,

¹² Rudowski (2001): 45.

perception from knowledge, present from past. The works composed by John Oberdorf do not offer comforting solutions, nor do they provide escapist perspectives of alienation for a consumeristic appreciation. On the contrary, they build monuments of doubt, of creative inquiry, declining the infinite verbs of reality in enticing visual conjugations. In this way, the pictorial window may - hopefully - disclose the promising directions of a journey into the unknown.