

My artwork explores life and death as it pertains to humanity in a sublime cosmic context. Life refers to the period between the birth and death of a living organism. Living is an organism's state of animation and is the ability to adapt to the environment, metabolize & grow, self-preserve, and in most cases reproduce. Death refers to an unanimated organism where its organic material is transforming into decomposing material. The organism starts to decay, and begins the end of its vital functions and cellular components. Using collage images of bones, the paint extends and changes the context of the original image to create a new surreal form. Within the painting there are forms suggestive of sex and reproduction as it relates to life and death. The bones are representations of life's impermanence, mortality, and evolution. The imagery expresses the recycling of energy, which is neither created nor destroyed, as stated in the Law of Thermodynamics. Every living being and thing is a part of this cycle, and it is observed in every aspect our existence. Life cannot exist without death, and death cannot exist without life. In my artwork research, I am investigating theories of thermodynamics and the recycling of energy, cosmic phenomenon, metaphysics, symbolism/function of bones, Freudian sex/death drives, past art movements that addressed related concepts such as surrealism, and the sublime. Throughout this statement, I will be relating imagery and the process of my work to these concepts and ideas.

Laws of Thermodynamics

Energy is never created or destroyed, but continuously recycled. In the laws of thermodynamics, the drive of the universe and the transformation of energy from one form to another is a fundamental part of our existence. The first law is centrally based on the conservation of energy and how energy can be neither created nor destroyed (Atkins, 2010).

Here are a couple of definitions from *The Laws of Thermodynamics*: *work* is motion against an opposing force, which is the primary foundation of the first law (16); *energy* is a measure of the capacity of a system to do work or motion against opposing forces. It is important to note that the same amount of work performed brings about the same change of state in the system (19); *heat* is the transfer of energy as a result of a temperature difference (21); *heat* is a manner of transformation of energy and where the internal energy within a separate system is not changing or varying. In my work, there are moments of bright, saturated colors, which express the heat and friction of continuous movements as the forms travel and extend across the composition. The forms transforming into each other represent this movement of energy from one state to another state (death to life or life to death).

The second law of thermodynamics gives the foundation of why any change occurs in our universe. While the first law describes internal energy and the quantity of energy, the second law illustrates the entropy and quality of energy. Entropy is degraded energy, where low entropy (for example, found in a crystal) means high quality of energy, and high entropy (for example, found in a gas cloud) means low quality. *Spontaneous* in thermodynamics refers to the tendency for a change to occur without any initiation from us (96). The entropy of the universe increases with any spontaneous change that takes place, transforming energy from one state to another.

Degeneration and destruction are intertwined in the basis of the universe and are an integral component of it. Without corruption and the degradation of energy, life could not exist and the continuation of life essentially needs decay (Prioreschi). In the artwork, the continuation and connection of the forms metaphorically show how the degraded energy recycles back into the continuation of life. In addition, by using images of preserved once living material (such as bones) expresses the renewal of life through the process of death. In thermodynamics, energy is conserved and recycled in use, thus cannot be created or destroyed only transformed as described

through this law. Thus, death is integral to the continuation of life, as metaphorically expressed in my painting.

Literally, the decomposed material that goes into the emergence of life is the same material that comes from dead organisms. As Tyler Volk wrote in *What is death?* “What happens at death to organisms is an integral part of the larger system- the biosphere with its internal wheels of elements. Most dead creatures are not just molded into the next organisms in the food chain. Dead individuals or part of individuals are subsumed into a gigantic functioning system, as parts of creatures chemically transformed go into globe-spanning fluids of air and water (12).” In other words, the atoms in our body are made from past dead material and are forever being recycled and reused.

Cosmic Phenomenon

In my work, I am contemplating what we know of life and death, but also what we don't know. Neil DeGrasse Tyson in his own words states, “at the end of the day, no matter how confident we are in our observations, our experiments, our data, or our theories, we must go home knowing that 85% of all the gravity in the cosmos comes from an unknown, mysterious source that remains completely undetected by all means we have devised to observe the universe (20).” In between the collage pieces in my artwork, the connection happens with the intuitive and spontaneous use of oil paint in response to the collage. This is the process of using the imagination to visually organize the composition of the work. The painting has science-fiction implications with the surreal flexibility of the images that are composed with the paint. There are similar visual elements and themes seen in the work of artists, such as H.R. Giger and Salvador Dali. The dream-like or surreal morphing of the images is more than just for the sake of mutating the image, but to fill in the voids of what we don't know about the whole context of life and

death. I'm not asking, but questioning what we think we know and allowing the imagination to fill in the gaps.

Most of the energy in the universe resides in some mysterious, now inexplicable form permeating all of empty space (Krauss, 2012). As explained in *A Universe From Nothing*, in the 1917 scientific community, the universe was static and eternal, and consisted of a single galaxy, our Milky Way, surrounded by a vast, infinite, dark, and empty space. We now know that the universe is not static but is expanding. In addition, we know that our galaxy is merely one of perhaps 400 billion galaxies in the observable universe. Another discovery in astronomy is that star stuff and Earth stuff are largely the same (Krauss, 2012). These discoveries change how we think about our natural environment and our place in it, thus changes how we think about our world and ourselves. In my work, the collage has a solid recognizable form that anchors the piece, while the painting begins to mutate and make unnatural connections. It is my desire to prompt in the viewer both contemplation and wonder regarding the infinite possibilities of the universe. I like to imagine that there is more to this world than we think there might be, and everything can fit together in a way that we may not yet understand. In my work, there isn't a direct answer that I am searching for, only contemplation of the cycle of our existence and acknowledging how little we know of our universe.

Metaphysics

Metaphysics provides an alternative approach within the contemplation of the life cycle. Metaphysics is a broad, overlapping term that can spread across many disciplines. According to E.J. Lowe, metaphysics has some mysticism and magic, but also overlaps physics in fundamental ways. Physics is an empirical science concerned with explaining certain basic and ubiquitous phenomena in the natural world of things existing in space and time. Metaphysics deals with

space and time, but it is not empirical, and is not solely concerned with the natural world. Its central concern is with the fundamental structure of reality as a whole (Lowe, 2002). Metaphysics is a way to explain abstract concepts that cannot be understood in concrete terms. Science looks for solid truth, while truths of metaphysics are very general and abstract (Mumford, 2012). It is not to say that metaphysics is not concerned with the world, but it is to say that it is not as interested in the observable world. As stated by Stephen Mumford, “*Meta* can be interpreted to mean ‘above’ or ‘beyond,’ and what we do in metaphysics is indeed above and beyond physics” (100). This interests me because it provides an avenue for pursuing alternative explanations and allows me to approach my work in abstract terms. In my painting, the bones are a metaphorical representation of this abstract idea of transformation of death. While we do have some concrete ideas concerning our existence, there is still so much we don’t know, and the more knowledge we acquire, the more questions we have. There is so much complexity and mystery concerning life and death that it is a natural progression to contemplate metaphysical possibilities.

The Symbolism & Function of Bones

Bones are bizarre, beautiful, but above all are engineered for a specific species through adaptation in evolution. Even though all bones are basically made from the same ingredients of calcium phosphate, collagen fiber, and protein molecules, the formula is different depending on the organism’s function for the bone. As stated R. McNeil Alexander, “this is design by evolution, a powerful and apparently inevitable process that molds the structures of animals to suit their ways of life” (14). Bones have a balance of strength, endurance, and lightness designed based on types of stresses, movements, and functions of a species. They all provide a structural and functional necessity for the organisms. As quoted from *Bones: The Unity of Form and*

Function, “in fact, bones are built up layers with fibers running in different directions” (33), which increases the strength and durability of the bones. Bones have a stress factor of two to five times as strong as is necessary for normal strenuous activities; which is a precaution of bone durability developed through evolution of a species (1994, Alexander). Evolution does not start from scratch with each adaptation, but works with an existing model, making slow but necessary changes to a species based on their interaction and needs for survival in an environment. As stated by Carl Sagan, “secrets of evolution are death and time- the death of enormous numbers of life-forms that were imperfectly adapted to the environment; and time for a long succession of small mutations that were by accident adaptive, time for the slow accumulation of patterns of favorable mutations” (1985, Sagan).

In my work not only are the bones representing the mortality and impermanence of a creature, but also the image of the bone is the catalyst motivating the painting process and ultimately structures and maps the entire artwork. Every color, texture, line, shadow, etc. in the collage becomes the painting. Even the actual texture and pattern of the bone has a design function not only for my paintings, but it has a real function for that particular animal. There is a literal and metaphorical use with the concept of bones of a human or animal. Even throughout our entire existence as a species, we have used bones as a practical tool, decorative objects, and having a cultural symbolic significance. In my work, there are not literal bones incorporated, but the images provide the same meaning and purpose as an actual bone would. Bones are the physical remains of a creature that once lived and interacted within its environment. All vertebrate animals (fishes, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals) have bones beneath their flesh that will be the only remains and evidence of their existence. Bones are the last remaining form of an organism before they too disintegrate and become water or dust.

Freudian Thought and Drives

In my work, the content does not only comment on mortality and life through the use of bones, but flesh-like forms emerge from the bones hinting sex and reproduction. The painting has various phallic shapes with indentations and holes suggesting vaginal openings. There are short and small squiggle lines imitating the size and movement of sperm. All of these forms are pointing to continuation and preservation of life, which cannot happen without death. This is a metaphorical presentation of life continuing through the destruction and emergence of life. In Freud's own words, "based on theoretical consideration supported by biology, we hypothesized a death drive, assigned the task of leading organic life back into the lifeless state, while Eros pursues the goal of complicating life by combining in a more and more complex manner the living substance dispersed in particles- and of course of preserving it in so doing" (107). In other words, there are two drives here: the sex drive and the death drive. The sex drive is about the preservation of life and the continuation of a species through sex and reproduction. The death drive is our bodies being programmed to end functioning (the purpose of life) and return back to unanimated material. These two drives are active simultaneously throughout the lifetime of an organism and act together in the creation of life. Our genes are pre-programmed to grow, procreate, live, degenerate, and then die. From the time of birth, we are born to die in the end, but continue our existence through the genes of our offspring. As Freud wrote, "the emergence of life would thus be the cause of the continuance of life and also at the same time of the striving towards death; and life itself would be conflict and compromise between these two trends."

Another psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, builds on the concepts of Freud making a stronger connection between pleasure and death. As written in *Lacan*, "*Jouissance* is the enjoyment of a sensation for its own sake, and is linked with the death drive, which goes beyond the pleasure principle" (Bailly, 2009). The author furthers his point by stating that *Jouissance*

and the death drive work together with that of drug addicts or alcoholics that would push themselves for the sake of pleasure to the point of death. This would be the same for anorexics and even that of adrenaline junkies, who place themselves in fatal physical danger for the intense sensation of extreme fear and excitement, which would in turn become extreme pleasure. There is a contradiction between experiencing the pleasures of life and in turn escalating to the point of death. My work explores bridging the duality between life and death. The sex drive and death drive work together for the preservation of the species and risking the end of life for the sake of pleasure. My work metaphorically suggests these concepts.

Artist and Art Movements

There have been other artists and art movements who have challenged our perception and concepts of our reality. For example, Cubism aimed to shock or disorientate its viewer into rethinking their relations with reality (2004, Hopkins). George Braque, Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, etc. all broke away from the traditional schools of art, and challenge the viewer's perception and thinking. The Surrealist used psychoanalytic theory to explore the unconscious and the extent of the human imagination within the context of dreams. As stated by David Hopkins, "it would be accurate to describe these movements (Dada, Surrealism) as idea-driven, constituting attitudes to life, rather than schools of painting or sculpture" (4). Furthermore, these movements created abstraction as a visual form of communication. There are various levels and degrees of abstraction with Abstract Expressionists from representation to non-representation. Surrealism has anchored elements of representation, which are manipulated to some degree creating a world of imagination and fantasy.

Abstract expressionist and surrealist artist Roberto Matta creates complex and deconstruct spaces that connect to the mind organizing information and making sense of the

world. As stated in *Surrealism and the Sacred*, “the disordering of the senses called for by the surreal state of mind deliberately invokes new cognitive resolutions, new ways of seeing the world” (Rabinovitch, 2002). For example, in Matta’s painting *Psychological Morphologies* there is not a complete recognizable object, but the painting is a surreal space and there are indications of forms, but it is uncertain of exactly what the forms should be. Morphological Psychology was created by Wilhelm Salber that was described as the structure of science of living things (Wikipedia). It affirms that our minds are in constant state of flux throughout the human life with space morphing from one state to another. As in my work, it’s about the constant change and transition of one form to another. I find that our paintings are both representing a free fall space where there is no orientation of up or down or left to right. There is no horizon line, but yet it still has indications of representing a space.

Artist and movie designer H.R. Giger created paintings that are organic in composition with forms morphing and merging into each other. The figures and forms transform jointly to create movement throughout the picture plane. In Giger’s book *Necronomicon II*, his works, “symbolize maturity and decay, with all the accompanying stages of pleasure and pain.” He is a surrealist artist with most of his paintings inspired by his dreams and nightmares that are filled with imagination and horror. He creates these compact paintings with elements of biological mechanisms and space environments that are science-fiction in nature. He redefines that surface of the human body with morphing and manipulation (40). In addition to all of this, his images are sexually loaded with magnification of the act of sex, reproduction, and pleasure. I am very interested in how his images seamlessly merge together and how the composition moves within the frame. It is very organic and sensual with a lot of action occurring simultaneously, which is aesthetically similar to my paintings. The smooth transition of images represents a metaphor for

the genetic merging of sexual reproduction and the continuation of a species into future offspring, similar to my work.

In my painting, there are facets of real objects (cut-out collage pieces) abstracted to form connections between the objects (painting between the collage pieces). The photographs of bones cut into pieces allowing abstraction to occur between the paper elements. There are three things happening in my process: structuring of the collage, oil paint taking instruction from the collage, and my imagination filling in the empty space. There is a sense of control in the manipulation of the digital image then a loss of control in the reconnection. I am in essence creating a puzzle when arranging the collage on the surface that needs to be visually solved through painting. As with the surrealists, I allow my imagination to fill in the blank information around the collage to create a surreal, sublime, and cosmic affect.

The Sublime

Sublime is the human experience of an extreme overwhelming feeling of awe and wonder to fear and despair. As stated in *The Sublime*, “awe and wonder can quickly blur into terror, giving rise to a darker aspect of the sublime experience, when the exhilarating feeling of delight metamorphoses into a flirtation with dissolution and the ‘daemonic’” (13). It is a moment that is so extreme in emotion that logical thought is lost and all that is present is the feeling derived. As I paint, there are moments I contemplate the vastness and infinity of life and at the same time how small and insignificant my life is in the large scheme of our universe. At the same time, we don’t know how everything is connected and works in our universe, so how do we know what we do affects the larger picture. Sometimes all I can do is be in that moment and express this contemplation in my work and let my intuition guide me to where I need to be. As Simon Morley states, “the sublime experience is fundamentally transformative, about the relationship between

disorder and order, and the disruption of the stable coordinates of time and space” (12). Indeed, my painting process expresses these qualities.

Conclusion

In my work, I am asking the viewer to think about their mortality, but I am also asking the viewer to think about the life cycle in a holistic way. We tend to look at death as something that is lost forever and there is great sadness surrounding these events. In my work, I am not ignoring the fact that there is loss when someone we love dies, but to also consider that death is not the end but the beginning. Death is the building block of new life and with death there is life, and the two can't function without the other. I want the viewer to contemplate these cycles, and realize they are a part of this larger system where living energy is never lost, only transformed through the process of death. Through the ideas presented in this paper (thermodynamics & the recycling of energy, cosmic phenomenon, metaphysics, symbolism/function of bones, Freudian sex/death drives, past art movements, and the sublime), I hope the viewer will contemplate the process of life and death with a literal and abstract approach.

Bibliography

- Alexander, R. McNeill. *Bones: The Unity of Form and Function*. Photo. Brian Kosoff. New York, NY, USA: Macmillan, 1994.
- Atkins, P. W. *The Laws of Thermodynamics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010.
- Bailly, Lionel. *Lacan: A Beginner's Guide*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2009.
- Breton, Andre. *Surrealism and Painting*. Trans. Simon Watson Taylor. Boston: MFA Publications, 1965.
- Eldredge, Niles. *Fossils: The Evolution and Extinction of Species*. Photo. Murray Alcosser. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Ed. Todd Dufresne. Trans. Gregory C. Richter. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Editions, 2011.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Ego and the Id*. Ed. James Strachey. Trans. Joan Riviere. New York: Norton, 1962.
- Giger, H. R. *H.R. Giger's Necronomicon II*. Beverly Hills, CA: Morpheus International, 1992.
- Hoffmann, Roald, and Iain Boyd Whyte, eds. *Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*. New York: Oxford UP, 2011.
- Hopkins, David. *Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004.
- Krauss, Lawrence Maxwell. *A Universe from Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather than Nothing*. New York: Atria Paperback, 2012.
- Lequeux, James. *Birth, Evolution and Death of Stars*. Tuck Link, Singapore: World Scientific, 2013.
- Lowe, E. J. *A Survey of Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002.
- "Morphological Psychology." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 18 Nov. 2014. Web. 21 Nov. 2014.
- Morley, Simon. *The Sublime*. London: Whitechapel Gallery & Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010.
- Mumford, Stephen. *Metaphysics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 2012.
- Prioreschi, Plinio. *A History of Human Responses to Death: Mythologies, Rituals, and Ethics*. Lewiston: E. Mellen, 1990.
- Rabinovitch, Celia. *Surrealism and the Sacred: Power, Eros, and the Occult in Modern Art*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 2002.

Sagan, Carl. *Cosmos*. New York: Ballantine. 1985.

Tyson, Neil DeGrasse. *Death by Black Hole: And Other Cosmic Quandaries*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007.

Volk, Tyler. *What Is Death?: A Scientist Looks at the Cycle of Life*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002.



Field, Collage and oil on canvas, 8 feet x 9 feet, 2015.

Image List

01. *Field*, Oil and collage on canvas, 8 ft x 9 ft, 2015
02. *Conversion*, Oil and collage on canvas, 35 in x 49 in, 2014
03. *Transcendence*, Oil and collage on panel, 2 ft x 4 ft, 2013
04. *Meld*, Oil and collage on panel, 18 in x 24 in, 2014
05. *Mutate*, Oil and collage on panel, 3 in x 8 in, 2013
06. *Reconstruct*, Oil and collage on panel, 8 in x 8 in, 2013
07. *Transmute*, Oil and collage on panel, 12 in x 12 in, 2013
08. *Transformation Study*, Oil and collage on canvas board, 11 in x 14 in, 2014
09. *Transformation*, Oil and collage on panel, 3 ft x 5 ft, 2014
10. *The Landing*, Oil and collage on canvas, 40 in x 30 in, 2013
11. *Unknown Spaces*, Oil and collage on canvas, 10 in x 10 in, 2013
12. *Metaphorical*, Oil and collage on canvas, 10 in x 10 in, 2013
13. *The Door*, Oil and collage on panel, 12 in x 16 in, 2012
14. *Amber Fading*, Oil on canvas, 18 in x 24 in, 2013
15. *Dimensions Converge*, Charcoal on paper, 11 in x 16 in, 2012
16. *Ripples*, Oil and collage on canvas, 12 in x 12 in, 2013
17. *Shadows*, Oil and collage on panel, 10 in x 10 in, 2012
18. *Milan Reflections*, Oil and collage on canvas, 18 in x 18 in, 2012
19. *Rosetta Stone*, Oil and collage on panel, 8 in x 8 in, 2012
20. *Rarefaction*, Oil and collage on panel, 10 in x 10 in, 2012
21. *Incoming*, Oil and collage on canvas, 4 ft x 3 ft, 2012















Shaw



























