

THESIS

TEXTURE, READING AND MEANING: NOTIONS, NEBULAE AND THE
NUMINOUS

Submitted by

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY JUSTIN M. JENSEN ENTITLED TEXTURE, READING, AND MEANING: NOTIONS, NEBULAE AND THE NUMINOUS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS
TEXTURE, READING AND MEANING: NOTIONS,
NEBULAE AND THE NUMINOUS

The thesis is commenced by a development of a theory about art that encompasses what is referred to as the *texture*, the *reading* and the *saying*. The first refers to that of which the art is composed, the second refers to the referential aspect, and the third refers to the intended meaning. Each of these aspects has a value that is independent yet supported by the previous. This is the basis for my critical development in art.

Within the *texture* level I discuss how the painting process is clarified as a push and pull between texture and render. The latter part of the thesis develops the key points for the *saying* aspect of my work.

Sacred Time and real time is an idea used in mythological that clarifies the otherworldly nature of myth. This idea is carried into my thesis research and is developed by the dichotomy characterized as the numinous and the Weltschmerz. The numinous can be defined as sublime, or the feeling of the presence of the holy. Weltschmerz can be regarded as the feeling of the wrongness of the world. These two feelings come together in what C. S. Lewis describes as Joy, which is referenced in the appendix.

The primary theme that I use to explore this feeling is the inclusion of deep-space celestial objects into terrestrial landscapes. This carries the symbolism of the mystery of the universe of that which is far seeming like it ought to be closer. It is the evocation of a moment of sacred time within real time. My intention in the sky-scape paintings is

summarized in trying to create a place that is transcendent of time where we realize a truth about our own world. It is a myth that focuses a truth into clarity.

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Texture, Reading, and Meaning: Notions, Nebulae and the Numinous

"Every poem can be considered in two ways--as what the poet has to say, and as a thing which he makes."

C. S. Lewis -*A Preface to Paradise Lost*¹

Three levels in Art

Concerning art, I see the potential for beauty in three different tiers. You could think of these tiers by the analogy of reading a sentence. The first tier of *texture* is simply the ink on the paper. The second tier of *reading* would be the letters (symbols of sounds) and words (symbols of objects, actions, and modifiers). The third tier, *saying*, is the thing being said. In the case of reading a sentence, we hardly notice the middle tier and perhaps never the first.

Texture

The bottom tier is what I call *texture*. This is not texture in the same sense as in painting but rather it is a looser definition. What I mean by *texture* is all that is visible in the artwork. It is the raw sense data before it is interpreted as an object. The surface

¹ C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 2

texture,² the color, the value, and the composition of these elements all have a direct correlation to the breadth of the *texture* level. The etymology of the word texture shows that it is related to text and textile which both carry the same connotation of building from individual units into a designed and meaningful whole. Even more archaically, this term is connected to craftsmen and carpentry. So the broad and ancient sense of the term fits well with my idea about the first tier of an artwork. It is the actual construction of the painting and process of constructing. The *texture* must be developed with the pieces in some order to make it move to the next tier of *reading*.

Reading: abstract and effigy

The second layer is what I would call the *reading*. The *reading* is based on the *texture* but does not sit directly on it. The *reading* is what we interpret the visual data into. When a *reading* is developed mimetically, it differentiates itself into something distinct from the paint. It becomes a design or an *effigy*³. It makes paint become something more than paint. This layer is why we refer to a painting as a subject. This ability to recognize is worked out in the mind and is not peculiar to painting. It is what allows us to recognize the pattern of light on our retina and translate that into information

² For clarity, I will say “surface texture” when I am referring to the contemporary usage of the term “texture.”

³ I prefer to use the term effigy, because it has the connotation of a likeness that is sometimes meant to stand in the place of something else, without being a perfect facsimile of the depicted object. This helps to show how it can be used to speak of Medieval iconography, Byzantine mosaics or Gothic reliefs that depict and stand in the place of the depicted without being perfectly mimetic. It also distinguishes from abstraction, which relates to an object but does not stand in its place. Rather abstraction uses the universal aspects of an object to create something that is new and distinct in the *texture* level of the work. This distinction may have a grey edge with artists who use abstraction to show universal truths. Here an abstracted figure, for example, may be intended to stand in the place of an abstract idea such as the sum of humanity.

about the world. This is why the tier does not rest directly on the lower one. It is in a sense developed from it, but it is also based on subconscious information that we know about the world (e.g. apples are red, the average human being is roughly five to six feet tall, etc.)

Another analogy to differentiate these tiers is that we see the *texture* aspect of the painting with our retina and we perceive the *reading* with our brain. That is, we know the *texture* immediately through our senses; but the reading comes from processes in the brain that coordinate, emphasize, or eliminate this data into meaningful patterns.

Aesthetic weight is a part of the *reading* tier because it is a mental trick. What I mean is that we can perceive designs of balance and weight in visual art that are not strictly there. It is our ability to perceive over and above our sense of sight that distinguishes design and visual balance from arbitrary bits of sensory information. Within the level of *reading* is a sliding scale with abstract design (or visual weight) on one end and *effigy* on the other.

Saying

The final tier is what I call the *saying* or *meaning*. This layer also rests above the previous layer, perhaps even further from it. This layer is what the *reading* refers to, or what is being said. This is separated from the second tier because a large amount needs to be known about the imagery involved for the *saying* to be clearly understood. It is more than perceiving objects; it is understanding the symbolism that conveys the story, moral, message, or intention that is being conveyed by the artist. Whereas the *reading* tier is distinguished from the *texture* by subconscious processes, *saying* is separated from the

reading by conscious processes. It is the difference between perceiving paint to represent someone's face and using someone's face to represent someone's god.

Beauty and emphasis

It is not particularly novel to create this distinction. Many people have understood that there is an obvious line that separates what is made and what is conveyed. Typically artists distinguish these as form and content. But this distinction is not sufficient in my view because it groups the identifiable representations with the *saying*. But *saying* can derive from the represented images in a narrative way and can also be derived from the abstract design qualities of the *reading*. The symbols that carry meaning may exist in either of the first two tiers. Traditionally, representation is used for symbolism, but the way a piece is constructed and how it is constructed may have a kind of *saying* as well.

Within each tier a work can and should be criticized. If the paint is applied uninterestingly and the colors are muddy and dull, then it ought to be critiqued in that *texture* level. If an *effigy* is off, then that should be noted based on the *effigy*, not on the *texture* or the *saying*. It is a mistake to critique a work from the other tiers. The *texture* should not be critiqued by representational standards and vice versa. But it is a valid critique to note if a work can be improved by having more of the other beauties.

(Representational work often benefits by having more interest in *texture* and *saying*.) At this point though, we have a question of balance, which I am unprepared to answer. I believe that this is where personal aesthetic comes into play. Some people do not like to have anything told to them and may dislike all art that carries a lot of weight in the

saying. My personal aesthetic leads me to an interest in all three aspects, but with the weight primarily in the *effigy*.

Applying the Theory

On Technique (Texture)

Artists must find a way to be true to themselves. I mean that their aesthetic is theirs alone. It may encompass any number of works that they enjoy but they alone see beauty this particular way. This aesthetic is important to clarify. I have been torn personally for a long time between two different stylistic approaches. I would look at one kind and then the other and constantly fret about where I was in the spectrum. I call these two sides, texture and render. On one hand I love beautifully rendered smooth still-life paintings such as those of Daniel Sprick, but on the other hand I love the surface texture build-up of Odd Nerdrum, or the virtuoso brushwork of John Singer Sargent. These are all deeply entrenched in the representational tradition, but are attacking visual problems from different *textural* sides.

As I developed my theory of tiers, I realized that I loved the beauty of the *effigy* very much, and also the beauty of the *texture*. The beauty of the *reading* related to the *testure* as a beauty that sits directly on top of another beauty. The beauty of the *reading* still has precedence, but one can either look at it or past it, to the beauty of the *texture*. I started to realize that the *texture* of paint has a beauty that is similar to water in a river. This makes sense why many abstract artists are drawn to patterns in rocks, water, and

clouds. It is not necessarily clear why it is beautiful, yet it is undeniably captivating. It is peaceful, playful and meditative.

Slowly, this started to work into my artwork. I worked on rendering as well as possible at one moment, and at the next, developed the abstract *texture* through brush marks and color choices. This became a back and forth push and pull of texture versus render. (Note figures 1-6 for examples of the increased textural weight and how it has developed chronologically.)

Purpose of the Theory

I have developed this theory over the course of my time in the Graduate Program to aid me in understanding different approaches to art better. It has opened up possibilities to me to expand my work in various ways, and to appreciate art in ways that I had not previously enjoyed. I present it here because I have used it as a basis for developing my work and it clarifies how I intend the viewer to read the various levels of my work.

My Development

With this idea of three levels to art, we can see where the artist intends beauty to lie, and critique accordingly. I began my journey focused on *effigy*. As I explored art I discovered that there is a beauty in the texture of the paint, the process of creating, and even sometimes in the mistakes. But to see this beauty I had to distance myself from the expectations of the *effigy*. As I studied, I realized that composition is an art similar to representation. We all understand composition innately, but we do not always know how

to define when it is correct. It is a perception that has to be cultivated through observation just like fine rendering.

As I became more involved with the process and the beauty of *texture*, I started pushing the paint surface texture and color. You can see from the progression of the plates how color and the quality of the paint expanded more and more. The *effigy* is still important, and the *saying* is still important, but the *texture* has opened up the works into a realm that I always previously lacked, but couldn't understand why. (See Figure 6)

Sacred time

The World is Too Much with Us

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon,
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not. -Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;

Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.⁴

1802-4

1807

-William Wordsworth

In the study of mythology a mental distinction must be made between real time and sacred time. We are used to what real time means, as it concerns everyday life and history. It is where we move and live and die. But sacred time is where myth lives. Myth lies in the mind of the hearer as a moment that does not exist temporally, but transcendentally.

The connection of nature with sacred time is strongly emphasized by the Romantics. Nature, at its most magnificent, has a connection to sacred time. Sacred time gives the sense of something happening in and around a moment that is not contained in the moment. It is time working in a dimension of its own, where a moment can encompass an eternity as equally as eternity focusing into a moment. But to mankind who is necessarily stuck in real time, duration is necessary for the entrance into sacred time. Sacred time may be thought of as a separate working part of the brain. It is not perceived immediately because of the overwhelming rush of information that the mind processes. But as a moment lengthens, the mind plays and “sees” what lies beneath or above or around. No analogy of words will clearly state this. This is an aspect of the mind that

⁴William Wordsworth, “The World is Too Much with Us,” in *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, eds. Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 174.

does not comprehend scientifically, that is, by experimentation or deduction. It is the part of the mind that can accept a fairytale at face value.

Wordsworth observes that the paradigms of the enlightenment have mired the truth of sacred time and the poetry of nature. This secularization is stale and less true even than pagan myth, which can at least show the wonder of the world. Today, the embrace of real time has become even stronger in the age of television commercials. As our attention span shortens, our sense of real time increases. The duration necessary to savor and enter into a transcendent moment is slipping from us. The classical arts, where time is necessary to delve into their depths are dimmer and dimmer in the minds of most people.

The Dichotomy

The idea of sacred time is a good place to begin in understanding the direction of *saying* in my work. I want to use the real (represented) world as a door to another world, to move into the transcendent moment. I wish to find this same sense of timeless mystery in painting that there is in mythology. I am interested in the dichotomy of the heavens and the earth to phrase it roughly. This dichotomy is readily understood, but not so readily defined. It lies within our consciousness when we make contrasts such as: good and bad, day and night, heavens and earth, spirit and flesh, yin and yang, sublime and vulgar, and as I have come to understand them; the Numinous and Weltschmerz. Numinous is defined as supernatural or mysterious; filled with a sense of the presence of divinity; Holy; appealing to the higher emotions or to the aesthetic sense. Weltschmerz is

defined as a mental depression or apathy caused by comparison of the actual state of the world with an ideal state.

This last pair, Numinous and Weltschmerz, has an implication about reality. The feeling of Weltschmerz is a reaction to a real wrongness in the world just as pain is the feeling caused by a real wound. Likewise the numinous is a genuine response to a reality in a reality (what better way is there to phrase it?). That is, the sensation of fear and awe in a grand landscape is the reaction to something more than mortal danger or primal survival needs.

In my paintings, I am continuously trying to pin down the contrast and connection of these two ideas. They seem to have no relation, but I believe that fundamentally they are intertwined. Consider a few points. One, it is in our closest associations with the numinous/sublime that we feel the most Weltschmerz. The sublime beauty that the romantics searched for was what led to the baptism of the word Weltschmerz. Two, as C.S. Lewis says, “Why must Holy places be dark places?”⁵ Our reaction to the holy aspect of the numinous is to sequester it, and to protect it from us (or ourselves from it?). Consider the mighty mountains in mythology that can only be approached by the best and bravest of warriors. Or the Holy of Holies in Jewish history that was only entered once a year by the purified high priest, and who risked his life every time he entered. Three, we treat the Holy/numinous as something that must be appeased. It is in its way dreadful and demanding. Throughout world cultures, people have sought to appease the Holy by

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold*. (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1956), 249.

means of sacrifice. This is interesting because it says that in understanding the numinous, we understand something about ourselves. Namely, we feel the deep and urgent need to *change* something about ourselves. Numinous shows us that Weltschmerz is a part of us, and we want to do something to correct it. The numinous shows that we are different than what we ought to be.

These two sides I have described are really one coin of longing or Sehnsucht. Weltschmerz and Joy are antipodes of the same world of Sehnsucht. The unutterable desire for these is what C.S. Lewis describes as Joy. For more concerning the nature of Joy and the inward longing of Sehnsucht, see appendix A.

Bringing the Heavens closer

But Heaven is still overhead, even if it is very far overhead. We have all the impression of a simple truth that has receded, until it was remote without ceasing to be true. And this phrase alone would bring us back to the same idea of this very notion of the withdrawal of some higher power, in all those mysterious and very imaginative myths about the separation of earth and sky... As to what it means, a man will learn far more about it by lying on his back in a field, and merely looking at the sky, than by reading all the libraries even of the most learned and valuable folk-lore.

-G.K. Chesterton⁶

My primary interest throughout my thesis research has been to try to bring the cosmos closer. I have developed a series of landscapes that include deep space objects that are impossibly close. In so doing, I am hoping to entice the feeling of awe and the sense of the numinous that I felt at those locations. The quotation by Chesterton carries the essence of my interest in skylscapes. It is the romantic feeling that the world should be

⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press, 1925), 91.

something other than it is. The heavens seem so far away, yet feel as though they ought to be close. The feeling of the distance of the heavens, yet the longing for their nearness is like the desire for the nearness of God. We crave this very thing that if it were true would ultimately undo us (in a very non-romantic way, we would be destroyed by the increased radiation, high energy particles and gravitational effects on the earth's orbit.) In the same way, we long for God's nearness (romantically) yet we would be crushed by the divine nature, not because it abhors us but simply because of what it is.

Even in our romantic sense, the nearness of the heavens would still lose their intrigue. We have miracles all around us already but we lose sight of them because we have become accustomed to them. This is exactly what Wordsworth is decrying. A nebula filling the sky would lose its luster due to our own directed attentions to "getting and spending," and our constant need for something new.

Conclusion

The primary theme that I have explored in my graduate studies is the inclusion of deep-space celestial objects into terrestrial landscapes. I started working with landscapes initially to explore the feeling of smallness one has in nature. As I pursued landscape, I began to see how easy it would be to include the deep space into our atmosphere. I began looking at nebulae and galaxies to include in some way into my skies. The inclusion of the skies sits in the *saying* aspect of my work. It has the symbolism of the mystery of the universe that we long for; i.e. of supernature appearing in nature. You can call it mystical, mysterious, metaphysical, or spiritual, or whatever makes more sense, but the evocation is the same. It is a moment of sacred time within our time. It is the same impetus that

makes some ground Holy ground. The celestial skyscapes say something that a landscape does not say alone, and that is important to me. I pursued the distinction of *texture* and *render* within this context of *saying* and I believe that as each improve, they do not diminish each other, rather they enhance each other. I felt that this balance of *texture* and *render* aided the *saying* instead of detracting from it. My intention in the *saying* is summarized in the term numinous. I want to create a place, transcendent of time where we might realize a truth about our own world. It is a myth that focuses a truth into clarity. Instead of Plato's three degrees removal from the truth, art is more like a lens that focuses an aspect of the Good into clarity for others. This is certainly a lofty goal, and perhaps one that is beyond my reach. But the best that I, or any painter, poet, writer, or musician can do, is to use my medium as a meditation; to see the meditative theme and the visual theme as a dialogue, with each engaging the other and creating something new through the process. What others see after that, I can only hope.

Appendix A: C. S. Lewis On Joy

Joy is distinct not only from pleasure in general but even from aesthetic pleasure. It must have the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing.

-C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, chap. 5, para. 2, p. 72.

All the things that have ever deeply possessed your soul have been but hints of it - tantalizing glimpses, promises never quite fulfilled, echoes that died away just as they caught your ear. But if it should really become manifest - if there ever came an echo that did not die away but swelled into the sound itself - you would know it. Beyond all possibility of doubt you would say, "Here at last is the thing I was made for".

-C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, para. 2, chap. 10, p.131.

Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise

-C.S, Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, bk III, chap. 10, para 2, p. 119

The experience is one of intense longing... This hunger is better than any other fullness, this poverty better than all other wealth. And thus it comes about, that if the desire is long absent, it may itself be desired, and that new desiring becomes a new instance of the original desire.

-C.S. Lewis. *The Pilgrims Regress*, Preface, para. 13, pp. 7-8

In speaking of this desire for our own far-off country, which we find in ourselves even now, I feel certain shyness. I am almost committing an indecency. I am trying to rip open the inconsolable secret in each of you-the secret which hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and Romanticism and Adolescence; the secret also which pierces with such sweetness that when, in very intimate conversation, the mention of it becomes immanent, we grow awkward and affect to laugh at ourselves' the secret we cannot hide and cannot tell, though we desire to do both. We cannot tell it because it is a desire for something that has never actually appeared in our experience. We cannot hide it because our experience is constantly suggesting it, and we betray ourselves like lovers at the mention of a name. Our commonest expedient is to call it beauty and behave as if that had settled the matter. Wordsworth's expedient was to identify it with certain moments in his own past. But all this is a cheat. If Wordsworth had gone back to those moments in the past, he would not have found the thing itself, but only the reminder of it; what he remembered would turn out to be itself a remembering. The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them

was longing. These things-the beauty, the memory of our own past-are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshipers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.

-C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 'The Weight of Glory' (1941) chap. 1, para. 5, pp. 6-7

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.

-C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, bk. III, chap. 10, para. 5, p. 120

There have been times when I think we do not desire heaven but more often I find myself wondering whether, in our heart of hearts, if we desire anything else.

-C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, para. 2, chap. 10, p.130.

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Figure 1: Prairie Night
18" x 24"



Figure 2: PLaiedes
18" x 24"



Figure 3: Orion
36" x 48"

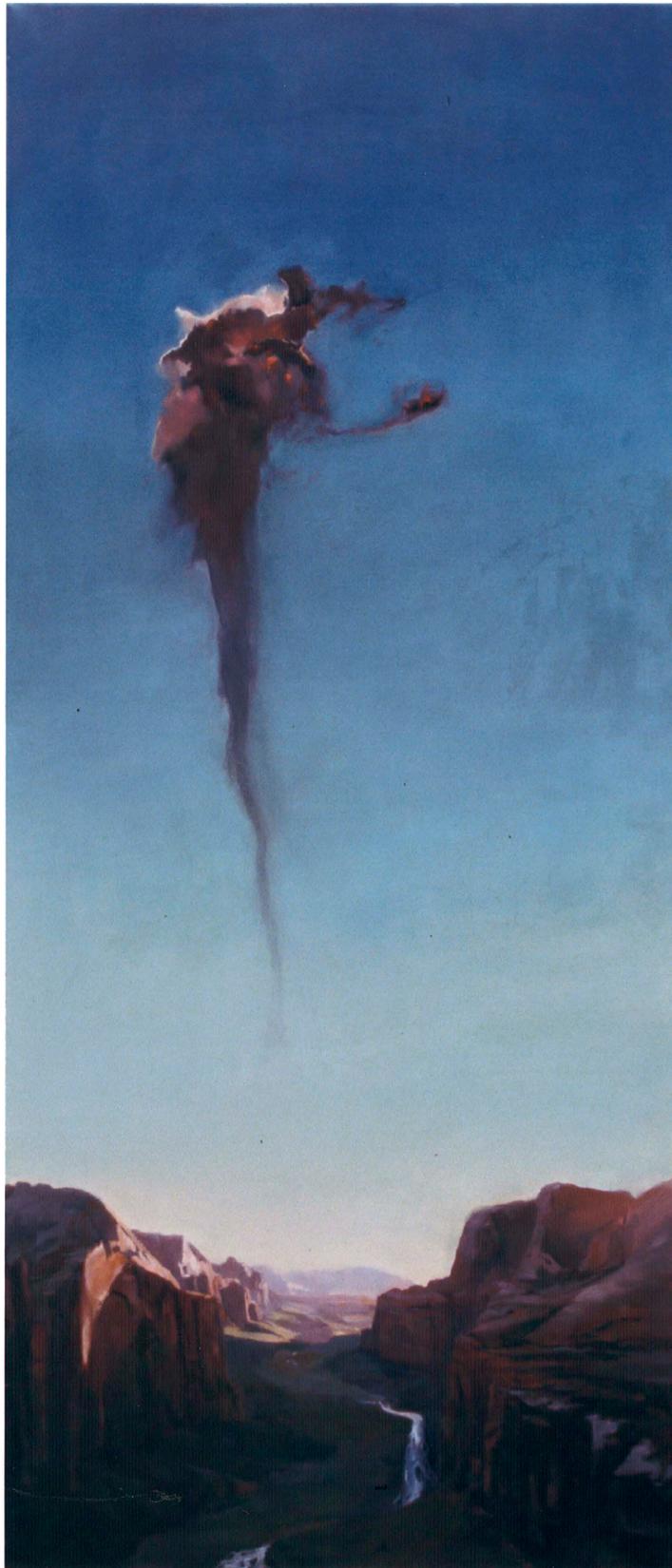


Figure 4: Cloud By Day, Fire by Night
26" x 60"



Figure 5: Prayer
48" x 60"



Figure 6: The Three Patriarchs
40" x 60"