Research Article

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Self-abnegation, Decentering of Objective Relations, and Intuition of Nature: Toomas Altnurme's and Cao Jun's Art

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Abstract: This article analyzes the artwork of two seemingly distant contemporary artists – Toomas Altnurme and Cao Jun – elucidating their creative processes through the theoretical frameworks of Martin Heidegger, Sigmund Freud, and Henri Bergson. In Section 1, I offer reasons for a side-by-side examination of Altnurme's and Jun's art. In my discussion of Altnurme's art in Section 2, I argue that his process exemplifies Heidegger's view that artists must abnegate themselves in order for their creations to come into being. In Section 3, I elucidate Jun's painting in its power to decenter the usual, object-oriented, circumspection of the mind. I ground my analyses in Freud's concept of dream logic. Freud's work on dreams allows me to approach Jun's creative process as a work of translation whereby the artist translates the preconscious elements into images that we – the audience – then see on canvas. In Section 4, where I offer a comparative examination of both artists, I rely on Bergson's articulation of the importance of intuition in order to show that both Altnurme and Jun create artworks that disclose to us the non-objective dimension of life wherein action or process and possibility take precedence over objectively existing things.

Keywords: dream-logic in art, freedom, intuition, Henri Bergson, Martin Heidegger, multiculturalism, nature, Sigmund Freud

1 Introduction

Both Altnurme's and Jun's creations, on my account, give us a sense or an intuitive grasp of freedom. We find this freedom in the play of forces at work in nature and in the superabundance of possibilities with which these forces are alive. The intimation of freedom that arises from the artists' creations is given to us not by the intellect, but by intuition. Intuitively, we grasp the preformed and the not-yet-objectified state of the world where not the concrete actual things and beings, but only the multitudinous possibilities abound. In order to elucidate the significance of the intuitive dimension in Altnurme's and Jun's works and analyze the way in which their art presents us with the play of possibilities, I rely on the theoretical framework and ideas we find in Heidegger, Freud, and Bergson. The paintings by Cao Jun that I discuss throughout the article are titled 1) *Movement of Clear Haze* (2016), 2) *The Mountain Looks Like the Sea* (2013), 3) *Dream Pool Essays* (2006), 4) *Boundless* (2013), and 5) *Colorful Time* (2012). Toomas Altnurme often does not title his works, and this becomes one of the points of my analysis of his art.[1]

1 Reproductions of Jun's paintings that I analyze can be found in *Cao Jun: Hymns to Nature*, John Sallis, ed. (Boston: McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 2018), pages 64, 49, 52, 93, 90. Hereafter, *Hymans to Nature.* Images of Altnurme's works that I discuss are as follows: Figure 1 "Inner Landscape" series https://drive.google.com/file/d/1M3ZVVyvICH8T0ukV37PIIZa6_wjeBe1S/view?usp=sharing, Figure 2 Peace https://drive.google.com/file/d/1X7la81k1bbYL_OJGnNg9LoFytIP7Lb5Y/view?usp=sharing, Figure

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In terms of the philosophical theory that I rely on, there are historical and conceptual connections between Bergson, Heidegger, and Freud; especially on the topics that figure prominently in my analysis. Bergson serves as a source of key ideas both for Heidegger and for Freud. As far as Heidegger is concerned, Heath Massey establishes definitively that "Heidegger's debt to Bergson cannot be denied."[2] Although "the size of that debt is difficult to measure," Massey provides ample evidence for the fact that Heidegger relied and drew on Bergson (although often without attribution or else in the form of a critique), for example, when working out his own concept of primordial time.[3] This central element of Heidegger's philosophical project – the rethinking of time in relation to the meaning of existence – features as one of Bergson's fundamental concerns. According to Massey, "Heidegger's resolution to 'understand time in terms of time,' his question about the ontological function of time, and his interpretation of 'within time' and 'outside time' as modes of temporality all have a precedent in Bergson's reading of the history of philosophy. In fact," as Massey sees it, "Bergson challenges not only the traditional concept of time, but the subordination of time to eternity in Western philosophy."[4] Indebted to Bergson, Heidegger proceeds to situate the primacy of action – of the active, as opposed to objectively solidified aspect of the world – on the basis of his analyses of time. Specifically, Bergson's view that "[t]here are no things, there are only actions,"[5] destabilizes the everyday perception of the world and of things, which present themselves as discrete, stable, self-same objects. Instead, and as I discuss in Section 4, the deeper truth about reality for Bergson is that it is a constant unfolding of a play or flux of forces of creation and dissipation. At the bottom, reality is a ceaseless act, not a permanent arrangement of stable things. Heidegger, and especially in his engagement with art, also prefers activity to objectivity. In Section 2 (where I discuss Altnurme's art), I show how Heidegger rethinks art, moving away from the view that painting, specifically, is object-like and arguing for the idea that the artwork is both itself primarily an activity or work and that it also discloses the active work-character of life. Thus, for my purposes of presenting Altnurme's artistic self-abnegation and the resultant relationship between him, as the artist, and the artwork in terms of the processual character and primacy of action, I rely on Heidegger's articulation of the active dimension of the artwork.

Thereafter, in my analysis of Jun's art (Section 3), I discuss Freud's understanding of the logic of dream-work. The direct line of inheritance between Freud and Bergson is somewhat more difficult to establish. However, there are conceptual parallels between the two thinkers. Janet Campbell writes about the affinity between Bergson and Freud that "Freud's theory of time is also Bergson's notion of the world" in a sense that the depths of repressed temporalized memory in Freud's model – "[m]emory, that in Freud's view leads us back, into a phylogenetic and archaic inheritance" – are articulated as the essential otherness of the world in Bergson.[6] For the latter thinker, the world is inscribed with eons of archaic time of which we are unconscious, but which is constitutive of our consciousness. Freud narrows the mnemonic register, ascribing it to our childhood and then to the subsequent experiences of a singular individual. This alignment between Freud and Bergson, Campbell continues, extends to the "model of vital energies" that we find in "Bergson's and Freud's work."[7] Moreover, as far as Freud's indebtedness to Bergson goes, and as Perry Meisel writes, Freud draws (without attribution) on Bergson's analysis of the relationship between "sensations and ideas," which Bergson develops in his "dissertation, the *Essay on Time and Consciousness* (1889)."[8] "Bergson … presents late in the Essay a figure for the psyche so presciently Freudian that it repeats before it occurs the famous metaphor of

3 "Inner Landscape" series https://drive.google.com/file/d/1t-PIAtQIYINT_WsulaAzFTLj5ZcF6XoY/view?usp=sharing, Figure 4 "Inner Landscape" series https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sdC_l0dUDetpiV7_YWpK58YLEm67q8fD/view?usp=sharing, Figure 5 Diving In, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1epLLW7StPt1JK0Npel3QIZ7gLQmJAoF-/view?usp=sharing, Figure 6 Balance https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MWD-V7pvtgCJxrC7aqjMKPNno7InKqvE/view?usp=sharing, Figure 7.

2 Massey, "From Time to Temporality," 332.

3 Ibid., esp. 331–3. Also, Massey gives an eight-point breakdown of Heidegger's indebtedness to Bergson on pages 343–347.

4 Massey, *The Origin of Time*, 216.

5 Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 165. Hereafter, *Creative Evolution*.

6 Campbell, "Rhythms of the Suggestive Unconscious," 29–50, 36.

7 Ibid., 39.

8 Meisel, *The Literary Freud*, 47. Hereafter, *The Literary Freud.*

the 'crust' (169) that surrounds the infant ego in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. There," Meisel explains, "Freud will show that this 'crust' produces just such a 'residuum' from the very beginnings of life. This 'residuum' will have become the Freudian unconscious."[9] Since the question of the unconscious in dream interpretation is thoroughly developed by Freud (who also relies on examples of painting in his *The Interpretation of Dreams*), and the question of the active dimension of art, by Heidegger, I turn to these authors in my discussions of Jun's and Altnurme's artistic processes, which as I argue, are best accessed through these phenomena (i.e., the logic of dreams and the processual character of the work of art). In the final analysis, both Altnurme and Jun give to the world liberating artworks, multidimensional in their interpretive potential. This freedom is made possible by the artist's refusal to abide by the strictures of the pre-conceived, overly intellectualized meanings (Altnurme) and through the upsurge of creative intuition (Jun). Therefore, and given the historico-philosophical indebtedness of Freud and Heidegger to Bergson, I engage with his concepts when bringing together my analyses of the artists' relationship to nature in its liberating power.

Whereas there are clear points of contact among the philosophers on whose concepts I draw in order to analyze Altnurme's and Jun's art, the connection between the artists themselves is less apparent. If anything, at first blush, the artists have little to nothing to do with each other. However, and upon examination, this turns out not to be the case – both in terms of the surprising proximity of their artistic processes as far as they relate to nature and to freedom and also in terms of the development of their respective styles. Although Altnurme comes from a Western background and Jun hails from the East Asian world, nonetheless, both their life trajectories and their art negotiate this very difference or even this very divide, i.e., the opposition between East and West. The distance between Jun and Altnurme diminishes when we focus on the manner in which both of them understand their artistic process and the power that gives rise to it, i.e., the vital force of nature. In terms of their personal histories, as far as these pertain to their art, both men have accomplished a movement that bridges the difference between the East Asian and Western worlds.

Jun, who was born in the Jiangsu province of China and who earned his PhD from the Nanjing University of the Arts, established himself through his work in classical Chinese calligraphy. However, his style came into its own only after Jun moved to New Zealand and became intimately acquainted with Western modernist art. It is in this movement from East Asian to Western sensibility that Jun discovered the uniqueness of his artistic expression.[10]

For Altnurme, the movement is in the opposite direction, i.e., from the West to the East. He was born in the European country of Estonia, where he graduated from Tallinn University in an era of rebirth for Estonia as a nation, which was liberated from the Soviet regime.[11] Inspired by the promise of the opening horizons of multiculturalism and internationalism, Altnurme then took up studies in Thailand and South Korea. He holds an MfA from Hongik University in Seoul. Although Altnurme is very widely traveled, for the past ten years, he has been residing in the United Arab Emirates. His artistic vision has been altered by these East and South-East Asian as well as Middle Eastern influences, which are unmistakable in his art and which have been constitutive of his style.

Thus, both in Jun's and in Altnurme's art, we find a wondrous confluence and understanding of or even a dialogue between East Asian and Western sensibilities, sensitivities, and art-studies that give rise to their respective styles. Another point of contact is the fact that both of them paint from nature. Their artworks allow nature to be such as it is in its creative potential. Both Altnurme and Jun offer us artworks that do not copy from nature, but that aim at relating a sense of the fecundity of nature – its dynamism and vitality. Their artistic sensibility pans out as far as cosmic events and reaches those extraordinary energies without which there could be no worlds, and thus, no world of nature. And yet, it also runs intimately close to our earthly surroundings. The two artists attempt to constitute without restricting our relationship with the forces of nature. Their masterly control is exercised not in order to dictate to the viewer the exact meaning of any given

9 Ibid., 51.

10 On the uniqueness of Chinese art, and specifically, landscape painting as well as its relation to the sensibility and culture of the people, Yingchun, "A View from China," 49–54. On travel and painting, Wang, "Crossing Light," 291–300.

11 On Estonian art in the period of liberation from Soviet Russia, Asmer's, "The Era of Great Myths," 79–100.

piece, but to exert the control upon themselves as artists. Both Altnurme and Jun restrict the need and impulse to impose upon their works a single look of a pre-guessed outcome. Instead, the artists allow for a surrender to and a dialogue with nature such that the vitality of nature comes to shine forth from their canvases and reach the deepest imaginative energies within their audience.

2 Toomas (Tom) Altnurme: Artistic Self-abnegation and Intimations of Infinity

Not only does Altnurme eschew any predetermined particularity of meaning that might be imposed upon his art, but he also often does not give titles to his works. His recent works are signed with a distinct configuration. The signet that is fashioned from the first letters of his first and last name, i.e., "T" and "A," is reminiscent of an imprint one might find on the heraldic insignia of the members of the medieval Hanseatic league. The entrepreneurial and cosmopolitan merchant league was active in the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries in the seaport towns across the Northern and the Baltic seas, including, in present-day Estonia which is Altnurme's homeland. Fourth-generation artist, Altnurme, has been surrounded by painters, artisans, and actors, and his artwork – painting and sculpture – reflects in its plasticity and expressivity the dynamism of the performing arts.[12]

For Altnurme, "art is a religion."[13] As he understands it, art holds within itself such truths that are otherwise inaccessible to human consciousness. An artistic creation, and the artistic process that requires it, exhibit honesty. This must be the case, or else, as Altnurme sees it, it may not be called "art." This idea that art is capable of offering us a unique relationship with truth is at the center of Heidegger's analyses in the *Origin of the Work of Art*.[14] In my analysis of Altnurme's artwork, I will focus on the creative *activity* or process, which although inseparable from the arrival of truth in the world, is nonetheless not synonymous with it. Altnurme's artworks effuse this dynamic, active element of the creative process into the world. Thus, I will analyze them through the lens of Heidegger's ideas, which offer a theoretical ground for understanding the primacy and significance of the active dimension of the work of art.

In the final articulation that entwines art and truth, Heidegger states, "art is: the creative preserving of truth in the work. *Art then is the becoming and happening of truth.*"[15] This formulation lends a particular emphasis to the idea that the work of art – that which is available for our circumspection – is, in an important sense, an activity. Gülşah Namli in an essay entitled: "Heidegger on the Poietic Truth of Being," explains that this activity "does not refer to the work of a producer rather it refers to being at work in the activity of work. This does not mean that it consists of a process of production or growing up which takes place through the embodiment of a form in matter. Rather," Namli continues, "[i]f we recall that movement or change is essential to constant presence, which could not be explicated by any duration, we see that what is constantly present produces itself from itself."[16] This self-production or active dimension of the work of art is in step with

12 As Altnurme relates, his "grandfather, Voldemar Altermann, had several artist friends who often visited [his] … family house in the 1930-ies. One of them was a graphic artist, … Eduard Wiiralt (1898–1954), who did a portrait of [Altnurme's] … grandmother. Theodor Altermann (1885–1915), Voldemar's brother, was one of the founding actors of the Estonian Opera Theatre. Alturme's great grandfather," as Altnurme recalls, "helped Nikolai von Glehn build the magnificent Glehn castle in southeast Tallinn, Estonia" (from an interview with Altnurme at the UAEU Art Center, which holds a collection of his works. March 28, 2023). Hereafter, "Interview with Altnurme."

13 "Interview with Altnurme." Altnurme's original family last name, Altermann, was changed in light of the WWII political upheavals in Estonia.

14 There are plentiful sources on Heidegger's analyses of truth as well as on his view of art. However, a sustained examination of these themes in Heidegger is far beyond the scope of this paper. In relation to my examination of truth and artistic process through Heidegger, Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 255ff; Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*; Schmidt, *Between Word and Image*, esp. 79–105; DeLay, "Disclosing Worldhood or Expressing Life? Heidegger and Henry on the Origin of the Work of Art," 155–71.

15 Heidegger, "Origin of the Work of Art," 69. Hereafter, "Origin of the Work of Art."

Altnurme's understanding of his artistic process, which is less of a making of something and more of a co-creative act whereby the artwork comes into the world through the artist to whom it calls. Thus, without this calling and without the inspiration of the artwork – even before it becomes manifest in the world – there is no creative process and, hence, no artist who can be taken up by it. Thus, in Heidegger's analysis, the priorities – between the artist and the activity of work (understood both as the artwork and as the creative process) – are basically reversed. The work and its creative possibilities draw the artist into creative activity. The artist does not simply "make" the work, as if it were a product fit for consumption. The artist is no longer primary; the artist is equi-primordial with the artwork.

In and as the artwork's activity, truth unfolds for us, for those who are taken in by the artwork.[17] Works of art are characteristically distinct from other objects – from things that have a clear utilitarian value and purpose. As Heidegger puts it, "[t]ruth is never gathered from objects that are … ordinary."[18] For Heidegger, artists do not, strictly speaking, "make" things or products. The latter serve a definite purpose, and we consider them to be best when their purpose is very precise and narrowly circumscribed. Although a knife can be used for multiple ways of cutting, the primary purpose of a knife is to cut.[19] As such, a thing like a knife is a tool "produced expressly for employment and use."[20] There is no such express utilitarian purpose that can be attributed to a work of art. Artworks co-create the possibilities that accrue to them; they engage the audience or the viewers in such a way as to elicit new configurations of meaning at the meeting point established by the relationship of the viewer to the artwork. In this sense, works of art are not merely things or objects, as Heidegger argues, but they live through us – through the imaginative engagement of the audience.

In order to make such artwork possible, as Heidegger contends, the artist must remain "inconsequential as compared with the work, almost like a passageway that destroys itself in the creative process for the work to emerge."[21] Strikingly, this is almost exactly how Altnurme describes his own artistic process. He thinks of himself as a vessel or a pathway through which a certain concentrated charge of energy passes and then gathers up into a painting or a sculpture. This – the force that he channels as he creates – is one of the reasons why he never "works in a depressed or despondently dark mood."[22] Indeed, Altnurme's works express a life-affirming, vital, and often also deeply joyous energy. They may give us a sense of the extra-ordinary power of a supernova (Figure 1) or the gentlest, and yet absolutely necessary, life-sustaining power of a budding plant (Figure 2). His paintings may evoke the grounding power of the millennia-old rock – that quiet, deep, essential force of the earth (Figure 3); or they may suggest the mingling of the Arabian desert's sand and wind (Figure 4). His sculpture might intone the dynamism of a bent bow, ready to release its dancing arrow (Figure 5); or Altnurme might set up a kind of dialogue between a sculpture and a painting (Figure 6). However, in every case, as Altnurme claims, he works from nature.[23] As such, he does not reproduce natural arrangements of life, but gives us a *sense* of nature's power; its effluent, ever-renewing vitality.[24] His person diminishes while he works and what takes precedence is the possibility of him being a

16 Namli, "Heidegger on the Poietic Truth of Being," 89–104, 97–8.

17 On truth as an activity of "unconcealment" (or *aletheia*), as Heidegger calls his preferred understanding of truth, as well as on the relationship between the art of painting and Heideggerian notion of truth, Marren, "Analysis of Evil in Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift* through Heidegger's Account of Dissemblance and Αλήθεια," 97–115; Marren, "Negativity in the Heart of Nature," 139–57. Hereafter, "Negativity in the Heart of Nature."

18 Heidegger, "Origin of the Work of Art," 69.

19 Incidentally, the hyperspecialization in education and in the workplace, as well as "professional" training guided by the goal and the demands of "employability" force human beings into this tool or equipment-like purposefulness.

20 Heidegger, "Origin of the Work of Art," 28.

21 Ibid., 39.

22 "Interview with Altnurme."

23 "Interview with Altnurme."

24 Unlike artists like Vincent van Gogh, who according to Marren, "attempt to master and subdue nature in order to make it intelligible through art," ("Negativity in the Heart of Nature," 140) Altnurme wishes to leave nature, precisely, free and untranslated. He wants his artworks to offer a kind of superposition of nascent possibilities – and through them – also an abundance of

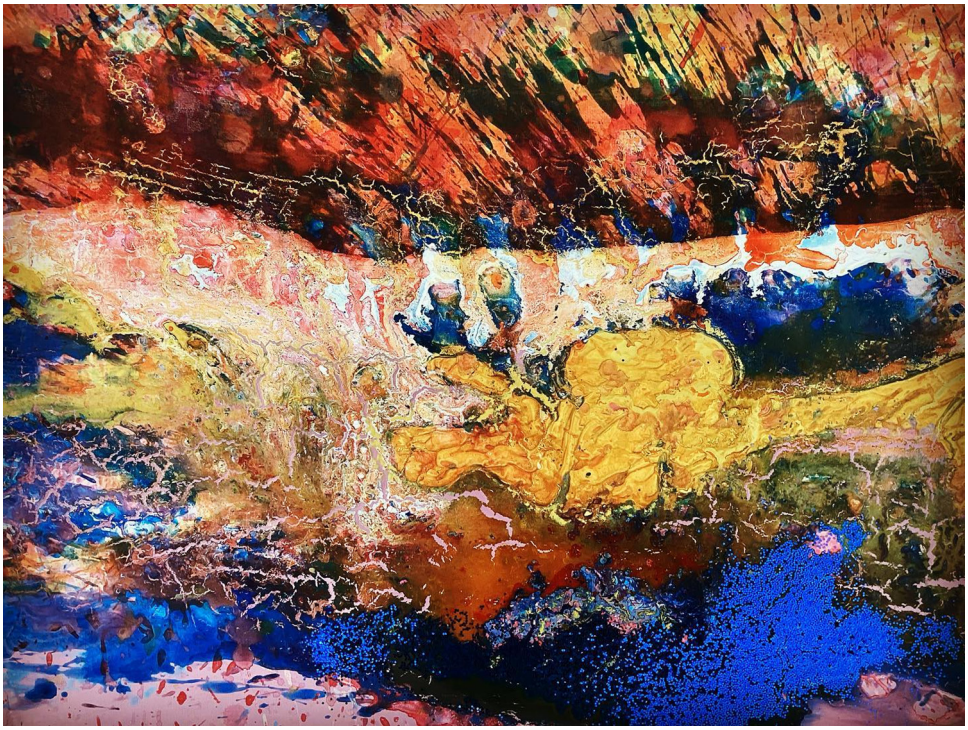

Figure 1: Toomas Altnurme, “Inner Landscape” series, 2020–2024, oil on canvas, 120 × 90 cm, United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain.

Figure 2: Toomas Altnurme, “Peace,” 2022, metal welding, oil paint, 120 × 70 × 60 cm, United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain.

Figure 3: Toomas Altnurme, "Inner Landscape" series," 2020–2024, oil on canvas, 120 × 90 cm, United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain.

Figure 4: Toomas Altnurme, "Inner Landscape" series, 2020–2024, oil on canvas, 120 × 90 cm, United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain.

Figure 5: Toomas Altnurme, “Diving In,” 2020, metal welding, oil paint, 150 × 170 × 140 cm, United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain.

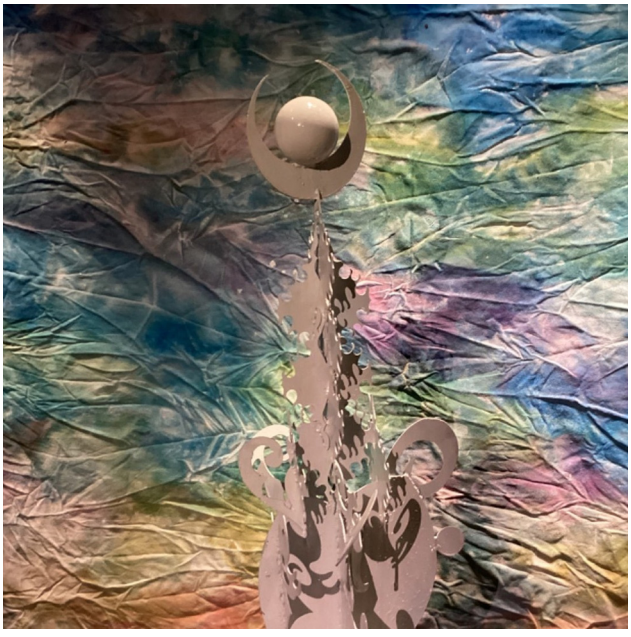

Figure 6: Toomas Altnurme, “Balance,” 2022, metal welding, oil paint, 120 × 70 × 60 cm, United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain.

focusing element or a bridge between the living force of nature and the work of art that comes into the world as the upsurge of this vital force.[25]

In drama, as Aristotle understands it, an active engagement of the audience enables a catharsis or a reflective transformation of one's own experience through the emotions, actions, thoughts, and choices that the characters represent on stage. So too, Altnurme's artworks are cathartic. They unfold and come alive in our presence, and they invite us to imaginatively participate in this co-constituted artistic event, which is the event of a relationship between the viewer and the work. In Aristotle's analysis, the plot is like the soul of tragedy,[26] which in my view, lives through the spectators because they are not restricted to a single interpretive framework but admit of an extraordinary semantic depth – the multiplicity of meanings, iterations, and appropriations that are ignited by the very experiences and life histories of the spectators.

Heidegger, like my reading of Aristotle, holds that the artwork is what it is only when it is not a mere thing (a framed object on the wall), but when through the relationship between the artwork and the viewer, the work of art co-constitutes new possibilities of life. Also, as Altnurme himself explains, he does not wish to impose a strict meaning on any of his works. He refrains from pre-seeing what the artwork will mean. He does not restrict his creations to pre-formulated ideas but sets them free for a play of possibilities that unfolds between his works and the viewer.

The importance of *not* restricting the artwork to a formulaic look is also stressed by John Salls. He writes:

> one sees what one will paint only as one paints it, perhaps only after it has been painted. In this sense—and it is the very sense of the painter—the painter is always ahead of himself, engaged with an invisibility that has still to be brought forth visibly on the canvas. But this is to say, then, that painting produces its depiction of something visible in order to present something that is invisible except insofar as the painting itself bestows on it a certain visibility.[27]

The last qualifying formulation from Sallis – "certain visibility" – (as I understand it) indicates that the invisible can't be rendered fully and perfectly visible. The reason why that is the case, in my interpretation, is because the invisible holds the multiplicity of possible iterations and manifestations to which an artwork gives a particular, and yet, not an absolutely determinate, look. The latter – the look of the artwork – evokes in the viewer's imagination other possible sensibilities, emotions, and thoughts. Therefore, the look suggests to the spectator the possible ways of engaging and interpreting the work, but it does not directly depict the artwork's activity – its actualizing power.

Just in this way, Altnurme makes an effort not to pre-guess what any given painting or sculpture will be like – what the precise look of it will be or what it will mean. Instead, he focuses on the process of work or the process of artistic creation. Quite palpably, Altnurme's creations retain the energy, the force, or the charge that surges up when the artist creates. This upsurge of creative force sends forth the work of art into actuality – into existence – and brings with it a wealth of interpretive possibilities that arise for the viewer. Altnurme is mindful of the critical importance of this intention *not* to focus on the end or "product," but to leave open the space of possibility.[28] This desire to let the work manifest freely – without the predetermined,

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multitudinous worlds. These are the worlds of sensibility, interpretation, vision, and understanding which, in the end, can disclose to the viewers heretofore unencountered insights into their own feelings and lives.

25 Heidegger's discussion of the relationship between the world disclosed by an artwork and the world of nature (or *phusis*) in the "Origin of the Work of Art," 42 ff. On the relationship between art, nature, and imagination, Wirth, *Schelling's Practice of the Wild*.

26 Aristotle, *On Poetics*, 1450a40.

27 Sallis, *Transfigurements: On the True Sense of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008), 12–3. Cf. Henri Bergson's formulation in the *Creative Evolution*: "[t]he finished portrait is explained by the features of the model, by the nature of the artist, by the colors spread out on the palette; but, even with the knowledge of what explains it, no one, not even the artist, could have foreseen exactly what the portrait would be, for to predict it would have been to produce it before it was produced – an absurd hypothesis which is its own refutation" (9).

28 Incidentally, I think that "product" is a very poor way to speak about works of art. Likewise, "consumption" is a gross misunderstanding of the relationship between the viewer and the artwork. I am hardly the first one to point out the deleterious state of culture that allows one to think about art as a "consumable product." For a thorough analysis of the way in which a loss of culture is related to the contemporary social and economic models of consumerism, Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 94–136.

Figure 7: Toomas Altnurme, "Inner Landscape" series, 2020–2024, oil on canvas, 120 × 90 cm, United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain.

exact strictures of a particular meaning – accounts for the dynamism and the vivacious or even *vital* force of his art.

Altnurme's insistence on resisting any predetermined, restrictive formulations or meanings given to his works, nonetheless, does not presuppose that he works in a complete, untethered transcendence of this world. On the contrary, his pieces are informed by the mood, climate, culture, terrain, and history of the place – in short, by the sensibility that a particular people give to nature. This is to say that while painting from nature, Altnurme is attentive to the unique ways in which nature manifests; and this uniqueness is often not only tied to geography but is also inflected by culture. A series of his recent works showcase this special attentiveness and respect that Altnurme has for a particular place that inspires his art.[29]

The warmth of the Arabian landscape, bathed in hushed dusk colors, rises up from this evocative work (e.g., Figure 7). A figure reminiscent of an ancient symbol (of a coincidence between the crescent moon and a bright Venus star) crowns an intricate arrangement of sculpted lattice-like incisions (Figure 6). This sculpture hearkens the viewer back to the Sumerian roots of ancient Arabia. However, isn't there a contradiction between the unmistakable palpability of a given place that is recognizable in Altnurme's works, and what I have set forth heretofore regarding his resistance to pre-defined looks?

The Arabian sensibility that shines forth from several of Altnurme's recent works is – to some extent – atemporal. It does not restrict the viewer to a realistic representation bound to the exact look of a place or to a particular instance in time. Instead, this sensibility spans millennia and places the viewer within the gentle warmth of a shimmering, milky azure of the Arabian sea bathed in the rays of the setting sun – the sun that already shone above these lands at the time that the Hafit culture built the beehive tombs.[30] The light of

29 Altnurme, of course, is not unique in this. Such recognized and celebrated artists as Vincent van Gogh and Paul Klee have articulated the importance of connection between a given place and their artwork. See, for example, Valentini's account of the relationship between Klee's sojourn in Tunisia and Italy and his discovery of the power of color in "Paul Klee's Journeys to Italy and Tunisia," 190–209. On van Gogh's travels in relation to his art, Pickvance, *Van Gogh in Saint-Rémy and Auvers*.

30 On Hafit culture and pre-Islamic culture of the UAE, Madsen, *The Early Bronze Age Tombs of Jebel Hafit*.

Altnurme's sun, however, is not that of an indifferent star that will outshine all human art and that will – in one raging burst – snuff out all life on this planet. It is not a symbol of an intransigent, lifeless universality that subsumes all lives and times. However, neither does Altnurme give us ready-made and readily recognizable copy-images of beautiful beach vistas. Instead, Altnurme's artwork suggests a direction of travel for the viewer. The path taken cannot be traversed by anyone but her. She co-creates the event of the artwork. The sensibility that guides Altnurme becomes a tonal key, as for a piece of music; or an orientation, as in an arrangement of planets on a cosmic map. Unlike travels in a physical space on earth – the space that does not alter its position and configuration while someone is traveling through it – the paths that Altnurme's artworks suggest transform when one embarks upon a journey. The force of possibility that animates Altnurme's work – its dynamism – ignites the formative power of the viewer's imagination.[31] Through this encounter between the potentialities within his art (potentialities that find their ground in his sense of nature) and the singular imagination of the viewer, the artwork unfolds ever-anew. Each piece is every time transfigured when the viewer traverses infinity that opens up for her when she is in the presence of Altnurme's art.[32]

3 Cao Jun: Poetic Logic of Dreams or Liminal Painting

Like Altnurme's, Jun's inspiration comes from the vitality of nature. He paints at the liminal boundary where what is not yet differentiated, not yet broken up into discrete beings, rises as a force from which and through which all of the extant things come to be. How is such an attunement to the inner forces of nature possible for Jun, and how, in Jun's case, is it translated into the language of art? To some extent, because of the symbolic and often abstract nature of Jun's painting, relying on common, everyday meaning-making will not yield satisfactory answers to these questions. However, there is a system of relations, causal networks, and semantics that might offer insight into Jun's artistic process. This system was elucidated by Sigmund Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud's work on dreams suits my interpretation of Jun's art best because, whereas Jun's creative process emerges from a liminal boundary of intuitive insight and conscious thought, Freud's analyses translate the unconscious elements into consciousness. Thus, the analytical framework that Freud developed for the translation of the unconscious or pre-conscious into articulate, discursive thought is especially fitting for my elucidation of Jun's artworks.

Freud's remarks aim to tease out the symbolic and conceptual power of images. The "dream-content" or what the dreamer actually sees in a dream, Freud envisions as a sort of a "pictographic script."[33] The content of a dream, according to Freud's discovery, is a symbolic rendition of the "dream-thought."[34] The dream-thoughts are latent. The dream-content is manifest. In other words, the dream-content renders the latent or unconscious dream-thought in the guise of this or that particular image in a dream. These dream-images are not just free-

31 For Klee "everything (the world) is of a dynamic nature; static problems make their appearance only at certain parts of the universe, in 'edifices' on the crust of the various cosmic bodies." Klee, *Notebooks Volume 1*, 70. On the importance of a dialogue or a relationship developed between the viewer and the artwork and also among artists (and in general on the importance of processual element in creativity), Mlicka, "Imagining a 'Relational' Painting," 275–90.

32 There are reasons to suppose that this opening unto or opening of infinity is possible for the individual, finite person because as Immanuel Kant held, for example, the infinite is really within. See Kant's analyses of *a priori* forms of intuition of time and space as belonging to the sensibility of the subject. Kant's analyses of time and space as forms of intuition are famously located in the Transcendental Aesthetic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Art that enlivens the multiplicity of possibilities – be they possibilities of sense, interpretation, experience, understanding, and so on – draws this infinity within the person to the brink of consciousness. Or, put otherwise, the conscious person in her engagement with the liberating elements in art, is drawn toward the abyssal infinite dimensions that span the universe arising, nonetheless, from the elementality of her own sensible intuition. On the various meanings and significance of elementality and "elementals," see Sallis's, *Logic of Imagination*. Hereafter, *Logic of Imagination*. See further Sallis's, *Ethicality and Imagination*.

33 Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 296. Hereafter, *The Interpretation of Dreams.*

34 Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 296.

floating, disconnected flashes of representation. Instead, they contain a decipherable meaning of internally connected relations. In other words, there is a logic to the arrangement of the dream-images. Freud explains that the "dream-thoughts and the dream-content are presented to us like the two versions of the same subject matter in two different languages. Or, more properly" Freud continues, "the dream-content seems like a transcript of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression, whose characters and syntactic laws it is our business to discover by comparing the original and the translation."[35] This implies that although the dream-thoughts are latent, they are *not* inaccessible to us. It is the work of a dream-interpreter to render the thoughts underlying the images of a dream sensible and accessible for interpretation.

Likewise, we can see that Jun, as an artist, performs a reverse interpretation; whereby, Jun goes from his intimate knowledge of nature to the images that arise from his intuitive grasp of natural forces and their relations. Thus, in Jun's paintings we are looking at an equivalent of dream-images that contain within themselves a key and a connection to a world of latent dream-thoughts – those fundamental insights into the inner workings of nature. The difference with Freud's dream model is that Jun's art arises not from the unconsciousness of a dream, but at the liminal boundary of the discursive conscious thought and not yet conceptualized intuitive awareness. The latter is neither unconscious nor articulate in the same way that regular conceptual understanding or everyday speech are articulate. This liminality at which Jun operates avails him of hyper-sensitivity and heightened awareness because it combines the open and pre-conscious with the masterfully attuned, focused, and conscious immersion into the world. In effect, Jun translates for us into new arrangements and into artful images *not* that which already exists as recognizable parts of the world, but those elemental forces that make possible the world and the different beings in it.

Richard Boothby in his engagement with Freud and Lacan works out a principle that helps explain the phenomenon of Jun's art. Boothby develops a relationship between the perceptible things and the "dispositional field" out of which they arise, which orients the viewer's attention. Regarding works of art, he writes that these too, or perhaps, especially, condition the way in which they are received by the audience. More precisely, in the world opened by an artwork, there are "no simple presentations, no monadic and independent objects unconnected to a surrounding environment of determinative conditions."[36] Instead, "[l]ike the luminal *enveloppe* of [Monet's] *Grainstacks,* the greater part of what constitutes the dispositional field remains unconscious, yet nevertheless remains active and exerts formative influences upon what does emerge into awareness. What lies outside the focus of awareness," Boothby clarifies, "constitutes the conditioning ground for what emerges into the focus. … It is from such a constitutive ground and in accordance with its peculiar qualities that things appear to the perceiver in a particular way." The dispositional field, as Boothby calls it, is precisely what Jun's artworks concentrate on themselves with such intensity because of Jun's capacity to create by drawing on the tension and the interplay of the intuitive, pre-conscious and conscious, articulate aspects of life.

Jun draws on the pre-conscious elementality that is inaccessible to direct circumspection of aware thought. This pre-conscious dimension, to which intuition reaches, then serves as the ground or, in

35 Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 295. Freud observes that the work of translation must take into account the "condensation" (*Verdichtungsarbeit*) of the dream-thoughts into the content of the dream. As Freud puts it, "[d]reams are brief, meagre and laconic in comparison with the range and wealth of the dream-thoughts" (296). Freud appears to have borrowed the term from Hartmann's *Philosophie des Unbewussten*, from which he cited in the both the original (1899) and in the consequent (1900) edition of *Die Traumdeutung* (*The Freud Encyclopedia*), 376. Another element that adds to the complexity of the relationship between the latent and the manifest content of dreams is "displacement" (*Verschiebungsarbeit*). Freud explains that the "dream is, as it were, differently centered from the dream-thoughts – its content has different elements as its central point" (322). Sallis discusses the significance of these moments for our understanding of dream-work and offers an especially intriguing analysis of the work carried out by "censorship" in dreams in the *Logic of Imagination,* 111–3. Cf. Sallis's image of esoteric reading as an interpretation of censored content in a dream to Bergson's example of reading (e.g., the *Iliad*) as an analogy for a misguided search for "meaning in the intervals between the letters of which it [the *Iliad*] is composed" (*An Introduction to Metaphysics*), 32. Also, Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," makes use of a notion of reflective or retroactive reading, whereby the "text we call present may be deciphered only at the bottom of the page, in a footnote or postscript" (*Yale French Studies* 74–117), 93.

36 Boothby, *Freud as a Philosopher*, 25.

Boothby's terms, as the "dispositional field" of the painting. Thereby, not only does the "dispositional field" attune the viewer to the present and particular aspects of the artwork, but it also calls her into the undisclosed dimensions of the pre-consciousness – into those depths that cannot be directly reproduced, but that can only be suggested or indicated to the viewer of a masterly work. Her attention and sensibility are, thus, gathered toward a painting in a manner that moisture gathers up into the force of a developing storm. As the storm arrives, the landscape is transformed. Likewise, at the time of an intimate tarrying with the artwork, the spectator is transformed or transposed into the yet uncharted possibilities of the sense of her life.

We can look at Jun's *Movement of Clear Haze* as well as at the inscription that he offers, as an example of the transpositional work that his art accomplishes. The inscription says the following: "I lived at the foot of Mount Tai for more than ten years and became familiar with the spirits and temperaments of mountains. Moreover, I lived in seclusion in New Zealand and dwelled beside the sea for a long time, learning to understand the feelings and dispositions of water."[37] Such a deep, which is to say sensible (sense driven and sense bound), understanding of nature allows Jun to attain extraordinary expressive freedom. What happens when, as Jun invites, we "break the boundary between mountains-and-waters painting and flowers-and-birds painting, making comparisons so as to figure out their common law?"[38] The obvious concrete quality of things breaks down. The dream-like dance and merging of the figures first evoke a sense of intense intimacy. This intimacy need not congeal in the light of day as completely unearthed, clearly present, and readily analyzable aspects of the painting. Instead, it may withdraw into the intuition of the pre-conscious ground from which the artwork springs. As such, a time of intimacy with the painting may engage the sensibility and imagination of the viewer along the lines of this intuitive withdrawal. From the silence of the non-objective, non-discursive ground, and through the person of the spectator, the heretofore untold and unsighted figures, feelings, images, and arrangements of things arrive into the world. They are ignited or made possible through the viewer's relationship with the artwork. However, strictly speaking, they can't be directly explicated or dictated by it. Likewise, images that surge within our dreams cannot be arraigned at our bidding; they can't be simply summoned, because they do not abide by the commands of a conscious mind.

In Freud, there is a struggle between a call for translatability – for the clarity and conceptualization of the dream – and a reverence before a silence that will not yield to being uprooted. Freud bears witness to this struggle in a famous passage. He admits that "[o]ne must leave a dark place even in the most thoroughly interpreted dreams, because during the interpretation, one realizes that a knot of tangled dream-thoughts hangs impenetrable."[39] Immediately following this admission, Freud in an attitude that is most akin to resignation adds that "even if it were," subject to interpretation "it would add nothing to the content of the dream."[40] Freud famously marks this dark place as "the navel of the dream, which is the seat of the unknown." He says that

> at this point, the dream-thoughts, on which one relies during the interpretation, must be left altogether unresolved and be allowed to reach into the various aspects of the entangled mesh of our everyday thoughts. Out of the tightly woven elements of this network, a dream-wish raises itself up, just as a mushroom does out of its mycelian network.[41]

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37 Davis, "Seeing into the Self in Nature," 25–34, 30 fn. 48. Hereafter, "Seeing into the Self in Nature." Davis points out that we have "Wang Huaiyu and Yang Guang" to thank for "their excellent translations of the inscriptions on Cao Jun's paintings" (30).

38 Cao Jun, cited by Sallis in "Vision," *Cao Jun: Hymns to Nature*, 70.

39 Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, 414. Hereafter, *Die Traumdeutung*. I give my own translations of Freud's texts in consultation with *The Interpretation of Dreams*, James Strachey, trans. (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

40 Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, 414.

41 In den bestgedeuteten Träumen muß man oft eine Stelle im Dunkeln lassen, weil man bei der Deutung merkt, daß dort ein Knäuel von Traumgedanken anhebt, der sich nicht entwirren will, aber auch zum Trauminhalt keine weiteren Beiträge geliefert hat. Dies ist dann der Nabel des Traumes, die Stelle, an der er dem Unerkannten aufsitzt. Die Traumgedanken, auf die man bei der Deutung gerät, müssen ja ganz allgemein ohne Abschluß bleiben und nach allen Seiten hin in die netzartige Verstrickung unserer Gedankenwelt auslaufen. Aus einer dichteren Stelle dieses Geflechtes erhebt sich dann der Traumwunsch wie der Pilz aus seinem Myzelium (*Die Traumdeutung*, 414). See, also, Freud's note to the interpretation of Irma's dream, where he uses the same metaphor of the navel (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, 135 fn. 2).On the relationship between the dream wish and Freud's metaphor, see Derrida, *Resistances of Psychoanalysis,* 15. See also Curtis, "Mushrooming," 29–44.

This tension, marked by Freud, between what is made intelligible and that dark ground from which any possibility of an intelligible world grows, sustains Jun's art. Jun treads close to the intuited, but not articulate, ground. Jun's medium is not discursive speech. It is not a set of philosophical or scientific concepts. At the bottom, we can say that his artistic medium or the basic unit of his artistic "language" is not even an image. The vital force of nature that Jun intuits and that announces itself in his art takes color as its medium. Color, says Jun, is *the* "language for me to directly express my feelings."[42] As a medium, for Jun, color holds the "highest degree of freedom."[43] And yet, this freedom is not a lawless, unruly disintegration of various tendencies, relations, and representations, but it is instead a freedom that admits of an inner logic, of a rule-governed system of relations. These rules and this logic are not those of everyday discursive thought, but they operate within the artistic process in a manner that is akin to the logic of dreams.

Sallis examines the dream-logic in the *Logic of Imagination* and concludes that "there is a logic that yokes contradictory opposites together in the dream. Here," Sallis signals, "is operative the exorbitant logic of the dream-work."[44] Sallis explains that "an exorbitant logic [is] a logic that, by traditional standards, borders on being indistinguishable from illogic."[45] How or, even, why does this logic work? It works because Sallis continues, "the dream-work renders *logical connection* as such by means of *simultaneity*, concentrating all the pieces of the dream-thoughts in a representation of a single situation or event."[46] Sallis gives an example from Freud, who "compares such a representation to that of the painter (Raphael) who assembles all the philosophers and poets in a single painting (*The School of Athens*)."[47] As Sallis sees the matter, "[s]patial proximity, in dreams, as in painting, can serve to represent significant relations of another order."[48] Whereas, at an everyday level, such logical categories as "causality" and "identity" must operate in ways that render the world recognizable, navigable, and largely unsurprising (as it would be problematic for smooth operations of life if it were mostly full of utterly unexpected chance occurrences, rather than mundane and monotonous events), the logic of art, as also the logic of dreams, need not admit of the same regularities. For example, as in Sallis's explanation of Freud's take on dream-logic, disparate, and distant events may appear simultaneously in dreams (e.g., we may see ourselves in the company of people who are far away or who have departed from this world). Also in Jun's art, in the *Mountain Looks Like the Sea*, for example, we witness such simultaneity as an extraordinary metamorphosis whereby the firmament gives way to the oceanic force, becoming the shimmering surface of the sea. But such transformations hardly occur in a span of time sufficient to be observed by a single human. Sallis further explains the character of logic that is operative in dreams and in Jun's artwork "it is a logic that tolerates and even institutes the effacement of difference, as in a schema of causality, which can produce the transformation of one image into another different from it, a transformation of one into the other as if they were not different but mutually substitutable."[49] It is the mutual substitutability that suggests itself to us in Jun's art, i.e., the very processual nature of life where not static objectivity, but change and alteration make up the fundamental law of things.

Jun's technique developed out of the suffusion of traditional Chinese painting and modern Western art culminates in paintings that suggest to us the "common law" of things. About the magnetizing *Dream Pool Essays*, Jun says, "Spilled color and golden lotus are my subjects in recent years. Usually, at the beginning I draw with traditional ink technique. Before it has dried, I splash strong colors and water on it and thereby let water, ink, and color infuse into each other as in a dream."[50] The sensuality of this infusion of the elements from which the image grows has an almost palpable quality. The movement with which the painting is alive –

42 Davis citing Jun in "Seeing into the Self in Nature," 31 and fn. 60.
43 Jun, "Seeing into the Self in Nature," 31.
44 Sallis, *Logic of Imagination*, 124.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Cf. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 330.
48 Sallis, *Logic of Imagination*, 124.
49 Sallis, "The Logic and Illogic of the Dream-Work," *Rereading Freud: Psychoanalysis Through Philosophy*, Jon Mills, ed. (New York: SUNY, 2004), 13.
50 Inscription on Cao Jun's *Dream Pool Essays* (2006) in *Cao Jun: Hymns to Nature*, Plate 11, 52.

the gentle mingling of "water, ink, and color" – allows the contours of the shapes to come into definition. The boundaries are not imposed by an external will but transpire there where the elements touch. This is no image of the cutting, splitting, and categorizing work that the intellect performs seeking to stake out the ground on which to erect an unshakeable order. The poetry of the *Dream Pool Essays*, just as the images that rise from the unconscious depth within a dream, unfolds as if from an archaic past that is infused with the unbounded future, but only to vanish at the "navel of a dream."[51] The mind fails to hold on to this encounter; to this point of vanishing, but where its conceptual grasp fails, intuition takes over and reaches into the uncharted possibilities of life.

4 Bergson's Articulation of Intuition and the Forces of Life in Altnurme and Jun

The animating force in Altnurme's and Jun's art – the vital force of nature – stands in opposition to the intellectualizing tendency of the mind. This doesn't mean that the intellect is left behind, somehow, in their artworks because the opposition (between the intellect and intuition) is productive. It does not call for an erasure of either pole of the opposing elements. Instead, the tension created by the opposites calls for a reevaluation of the roles given to the objective, mind-dependent, and pre- or unconscious and intuitive dimensions of creative works and our lives. Altnurme's artworks retain the processual, active elements that characterize life (and which I have analyzed through Heidegger's *Origin of the Work of Art*). Jun's sensibility of nature's pre-conscious forces avails him of creative insights into the pre-formed or non-objectified life of nature.[52] I have relied on Freud's work in *The Interpretation of Dreams* as well as on analyses of dream logic to elucidate Jun's artistic intuition and his creative process. As I have shown in Section 1, both Heidegger (in his thinking about the multidimensionality and the processual nature of time) and Freud (as far as some of his theories about the relationship between the unconscious and articulate ideas are concerned) are indebted (often without acknowledging their indebtedness) to Bergson. Bergson's interest in the creativity of nature and the intuitive aspect of life will serve as the ground for bringing closer together Altnurme's and Jun's art.

Bergson, who seeks to pivot our searches away from categorization, planning, and ordering work of the intellect, privileges intuition. However, for Bergson, these two – the mind and intuition – are not utterly separate powers. At the vanishing point of the objective, crystallized, distinct, precise, and clear creations of the intellect, the mind gives way to intuition.[53] At this point, the objective and familiar quality of things falls away. According to Bergson, painters are especially apt at intuitive encounters with the world that allow for dissipation of familiar objective relations because the sight of the painter is atelic.[54] A painter's vision is free to engage in a play of possible configurations – of those images that have not yet been codified and ensconced by the necessities of everyday life.

For Jun, the discreet thinghood of things gives way to what he calls the "common law" of beings that the intellect renders dissimilar and distinct. In Altnurme's presentation, works of art open up a multiplicity of worlds that offer new configurations and interpretive possibilities. In Bergson's formulation, this law that Jun has in mind and the insight that Altnurme's art elicits, indicate that "[t]here are no things, there are only actions."[55] Our perception of concrete, self-sustained things and beings is – to some extent – an illusion. After all, everything that is – no matter how long-lasting – will at some point cease to exist. Therefore, everything is constantly in the process of change, which in its final manifestation presupposes a change into non-being. Thus, our perception of concrete, lasting, self-same objects would be very different if we could pan out of a linear representation of causality in time. We would then see not a tree, but a process of enlarging, developing,

51 Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, 414.

52 On the relationship between the self, objecthood, and nature, see Marina Marren, "Repression and Return of Nature in Hegel and Beyond," 1–13.

53 On this point, consult Bergson's (1934) introduction to *The Creative Mind*.

54 Bergson, La pensée et le mouvant (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1938), 152.

55 Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 165.

blossoming, and then waning, withering, and disappearing. We would not see an airplane, but parts being set together, coming into a concrete arrangement, and then being pulled apart. The most recognizable, the most object-like look of things – a grown tree or a functioning airplane – would become one of the moments in the process or in a series of equally significant actions.

Bergson thinks about such a rough and tumble of the play of forces as an "image of a *creative action which unmakes itself*."[56] In a creative action, says Bergson, "we have already a more exact representation of matter. In vital activity we see, then," Bergson continues "that which subsists of the direct movement in the inverted movement, *a reality which is making itself in a reality which is unmaking itself*."[57] The vital impulse in a stock of lemongrass yearns to express itself in a being of the plant, but this activity of manifesting as or even in a living being comes at a necessary price. The vital force that materializes as a leaf; the fragrance that emanates as the sensible transformation of the sun's energy; the pliable, smooth stock that draws its nutrients from earth and water – all these palpable, sensible manifestations of the life of a plant must necessarily be stilled and wilt, then vanish and be gone. The stillness of lifelessness is the price for life, but they are also its condition, because vitality alone – the pure force as action – would not come to be, unless it were captured in matter, which for all of its living vigor holds also the kernel of death.

The Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas, encapsulates this relationship between life and death as well as the vital force and its embodied manifestation in and as finite matter. He writes, "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower/Drives my green age;/that blasts the roots of trees/Is my destroyer" (Dylan Thomas). "And," then he warns us, "I am dumb to tell the crooked rose/My youth is bent by the same wintry fever."[58] Dylan Thomas signals five more times, in the duration of this poem, the recalcitrance on the part of the force to be announced in such a way that would give us the "common law" of animal blood, and plant life; of cosmic time, and human love. This "I am dumb," said by the poet, is a humble recognition of the mystery, which cannot be revealed without being made counterfeit.

Once announced with clarity and precision, a given statement avails us of assessing its truth value, accepting or rejecting it, and calculating the best outcomes for whatever future that we see fit. However, convenient for planning and directing human life, this calculability denies creativity to nature. Bergson notes that in this dissecting, calculative attitude, our mind is fitted to the properties, behavior, and laws applicable to matter, which even if it is enlivened, is already *en route* to no longer being alive. "In so far as we are geometricians," says Bergson, "we reject the unforeseeable. We might accept it, assuredly, in so far as we are artists, for art lives on creation and implies a latent belief in the spontaneity of nature."[59] Unlike Altnurme's and Jun's brush, the intellect, says Bergson, "dislikes what is fluid, and solidifies everything it touches. We do not *think* real time. But we *live* it, because life transcends intellect."[60] To bring Bergson's insight about lived time to bear on Jun's words about color – about the tones that are both visible and audible and that move or transpose us as if into the figures of a dance and images of a dream – we can say that when in touch with this deep time, invigorated by art, we attain to the "highest degree of freedom."[61] The freedom, both for Altnurme and for Jun, lies in the degree of force with which they can render palpable feelings and non-verbal, non-discursive intuitions. Freedom, for Bergson, entails the dissipation of the strictures that the intellect imposes onto the ceaseless action, which is life. Altnurme and Jun, then, paint from an intuitive *feeling* of the forces that constitute the vital core of nature or, from what Bergson calls: "the inner movement of life."[62] One of the reasons why painters are capable of sensing this movement is because, as Brendan Prendeville writes, they "according to Bergson, are defined by their exemption from … perceptual utilitarianism."[63] The

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Thomas, "The Force that Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower," *Dylan Thomas Selected Poems, 1934 – 1952* (New York, NY: New Directions Books Publishing, 2003), 9.

59 Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 30.

60 Ibid., 31.

61 Jun, "Seeing into the Self in Nature," 31. See also Berger, "Painting and Time," *Journal of Contemporary Painting* 4(1) (2018): 11–5.

62 Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 31.

63 Prendeville, "Painting the Invisible," 191. Hereafter, "Painting the Invisible."

use-value and the ordinary purpose of things do not monopolize the painter's imagination and vision. The painter, therefore, is free to perceive the play of the possible, instead of being guided by the strictures of necessity and utility.

Bret W. Davis explains that "Bergson sought to reawaken a sense for the inner freedom of the *élan vital*, to return us to an intuition of the *durée pure* of creative time. … [T]hat fundamental self in touch with his or her inner freedom, a freedom which springs from an intimate connection to the vital impulse of life itself."[64] The fascinating element, here, which Jun's images such as the *Dream Pool Essays* as well as *Boundless* and Altnurme's painting (Figure 1), too, vividly relate is that the "inner," be it understood as the "movement of life" or as "freedom," is displaced or decentered. It is pushed out into the fringes and away from the familiar world. On this subject, Bergson writes that "the feeling we have of our evolution and of the evolution of all things in pure duration is there, forming around the intellectual concept properly so-called an indistinct fringe that fades off into darkness. … [T]he whole must be used, the fluid as well as and more than the condensed, in order to grasp the inner movement of life."[65] In order to catch a glimpse of this inner movement, one has to refocus one's attention. One must aim it away from the intellectualized, conceptually rigorous presentation of things because concepts, useful though they may be, often chain our interpretive and imaginative capacities to a single, particular, precise and, therefore, one-sided or limited interpretation of the world. Thus, in order *not* to sacrifice abundant possibilities and multiplicities of insights for conceptual precision, one must go far afield of the center-bound core of accepted and established knowledge. This means, furthermore, that coming in touch with the unfolding of life requires one to set aside also an egocentric attitude. Altnurme says about the ego that in order to paint, he must all but dissolve his ego; he must give himself over to the creative act. Only in this attitude of self-abnegation does the multitudinous and multi-dimensional force of nature announce itself to the artist's intuition. From this multidimensionality, the work of art arises and brings with it the possibility of new interpretive horizons.

Likewise, for Bergson, the movement of life is a ceaseless act that expresses the play of forces, which in their unfolding cannot be situated in one causally determined dimension. As Prendeville writes, "Bergson's central intuition … is that the universe is inherently dynamic, that duration, *la durée*, is its essence, that matter is itself durational."[66] However, if the latter is the case, then as my earlier example of the tree and the airplane shows, durational or processual unfolding of life suggests that what we take as our usual point of departure is rather arbitrary. In other words, when we say that the linear arrow of time prescribes that we see the tree as the cause of a seed, we are remiss; just as readily, the seed is the cause of the tree. But even further, we can isolate a point on the ever-encircling spiral of change and claim that, for example, the rooting of the sapling is the starting point, and hence the cause of the organism – of the tree and the seed that it then produces. Once we realize that change and alteration, rather than objective material objects, make up the fundamental ground of life and world, we are free to perceive the possibilities which abound within the ever-changing vicissitudes of life. This nonlinear, decentered time is palpable in both Jun's and Altnurme's work.

When one looks at Jun's *Colorful Time,* which finds an exuberant, quickened counterpart in Altnurme (Figure 3), one has a sense of being somehow taken across the various temporal vicissitudes. The temporal nexuses that rise up from these paintings are layered, and they pierce through to the momentous presence that is both past and – at the same time – is not yet here with us. These paintings give a sense of the unfolding of time while through them we ourselves become less insistent on the need to reckon with objective reality. Taken in by these paintings, one steps away from the linearity of the objective time and steps into a world of an extraordinary simultaneity of past and future, where the liberating dimension of the possible resides.

Bergson advises that "[w]e must get beyond … both mechanism and finalism [which are] … at bottom only standpoints to which the human mind has been led by considering the work of man. But," he asks "in what direction can we go beyond them?"[67] As earthlings, as those who tread upon the earth, we are precariously dependent on the upright sense of balance. Our buoyancy leaves something to be desired. On solid ground, the

64 Davis, "Rethinking the Rational Animal," 173–88, 177.
65 Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 31.
66 Prendeville, "Painting the Invisible," 191.
67 Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 59.

way is back and forward, up and down, but this ground, itself, is suspended as our earth runs its rounds carried through the cosmic flesh. The fish and fowl seem to have a better sense of the multi-directionality, which is the way of suspended being, that – at bottom and as our cosmic way – is also ours.

5 Conclusion

In an attempt to gain the escape velocity necessary to break free from the unilinear advance in movement, I call us back to Jun's and Altnurme's displacement of the objective order that underlies the photographic, clear-cut, and copy-like images of things. Jun invites us to witness a different sense and another look of the world that is faithful to the inner life of nature. This almost dream-like look, which I have analyzed through Freud's work on dreams, shines forth in *The Mountain Looks Like the Sea*. One finds here a coincidence of the forces of nature, whereby the lithic movement becomes an oceanic ebb and flow, and the water takes on a guise of the firmament. As if moving along a temporal axis at will and in both directions simultaneously, we catch a glimpse of the formative powers that bring recognizable arrangements into existence. It is just this sort of energy that manifests as a dynamic cadence of change; it is this process of alteration, which is not yet concretely materialized as a particular being, that Altnurme's work ([Figure 4] which I have assessed through Heidegger's ideas about artwork) also shows. We can say that this movement, sequenced through Altnurme's and Jun's art, is what Bergson understands as "the projection of an indivisible intuition."[68] Such a projection is what a painter seeks to accomplish when composing out of the various elements and shades of color "a figure," which according to Bergson, "the artist has conceived as a simple thing."[69] However, the thinghood or the objective purpose that we attribute to things is not there in these artists' creations. In so far as we are in the presence of their artwork, we are in some loose sense in the presence of a "simple thing," but this simplicity is best rendered as a singularity because both artists gather up for us and then render palpable an intuition of a magnificent array of possibilities. In this, we are offered a singular gift of extraordinary freedom – of a world and life that has not yet been given over to any particular concretions of conceptual thought or materializations in the objective presence of things.

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