

SYMBOLS OF GROWTH

Raimundo Figueroa

Presented by Luigi Marrozzini Gallery

Published on the occasion of the exhibition on September 1989 at the Art & History Museum of San Juan

Chaos, Creativity and Raimundo Figueroa

What of the artist and of the scientist? I, being of the medical profession, supposedly practice both art and science. What is the difference? Or rather what have they in common? Understanding this relationship will help give clues to understanding creativity, the process of Raimundo Figueroa's work and the new emerging concept of chaos.

Science is supposed to deal only with hard facts: numbers and equations. Computers come to mind. However, computers cannot think, on their own. Can unaided thinking be the "art" we are looking for? But isn't there thinking that is not very artful nor creative. The most creative thinking has to do with symbols. Symbols are any sort of stimuli that represent two ideas simultaneously. Here we start to see the interplay between art and science. If scientists were to choose symbols would they incorporate two ideas that closely approximate each other, with the artist choosing disparate ideas? First of all, one must realize that symbols are paradoxical in nature, that is, the ideas they represent do not laterally fit the object used. Of course, there is usually a consensus. When Benjamin Franklin wanted to use the turkey as the symbol of our new country, he was out voted by those who wanted a more majestic bird: the eagle. However, the French did not object when Napoleon chose the industrious bee to represent their new republic.

In psychology, the attempts made to understand the various meanings given to symbols have centered around understanding what one sees objectively (the conscious) and that subjective experience one is not usually totally aware of (the unconscious). The obvious interpretation of the bald eagle as being simply another bird of prey would be an example of the conscious. How much one can

reorder and restructure the image of this bird and for instance think of might and power and feel pride would be example of our unconscious. Thus, to be creative one has to bypass the conscious, not allowing it to limit one's potential of interpretation.

Thus using what has been referred to as "child like openness" by Robert McCully one can enter into a world not inhabited by many. However, because of man's immeasurable gift called his brain, anyone can enter, see and feel unusual images emanating from seemingly ordinary experiences. The bald eagle can be seen as the dilemma that man faces when he realizes his mortality. Maybe someone can see this bird as being an example of the new craze in science: chaos. The eagle is "deterministic randomness". As Robert pool said "deterministic" because it arise, from intrinsic causes and not from some extraneous noise of interference; and "randomness" referring to irregular, "unpredictable behavior."

People have a "chaotic" unconscious: it is impossible to predict what it will do. Yet it does follow certain rules. Thus, with its expression, via the conscious, what at first might seem random, will have meaning, because everyone can identify with the rules of the unconscious hidden in the chaotic message. The artist's role is to be able to so completely bypass the restraining forces of the conscious so that what is expressed is faithful to both the randomness of the unconscious and to its intrinsic rules.

El Olvido, Pablo Neruda
Como te llamas, me pregunto aquel árbol
y cuales son tus hojas?
La Torre pregunto
que altura tienes?
Me recosté en la tierra
y nada pregunto, nada me dijo
todo lo sabe porque esta esperando
y aprendió todo los que esperaban
ya sabe tanto que es como el olvido
eso es, no tiene termino
no hay fin, no hay
fin, no hay punto en el olvido.

This is the poem "To Forget" by Pablo Neruda that inspired the maestra work of the same name by Raimundo Figueroa. Loosely,

the poem starts off with questions from a tree to a tower: “where are your leaves,” and “how tall are you,” respectively. Then the poet lies down, saying that no one is now asking him anything. It is as if he is caught up in waiting to forget. However, forgetting has no end; there is no end-point in forgetting.

Since I see a pattern in the series of painting presented, I will give my impression of what went on before, as seen in two series of paintings one call ‘Love’ and the other ‘Hurt’ before trying to understand the significance of this focal painting and the ones that follow.

In the ‘Love’ series of small paintings, one sees a literal childlike quality in the expression of warm feeling, towards someone special. We see childlike images in the paintings “Jonah and the Whale” and “Hearts” and the initial tendency seem more developed later to express chaos via spots in thoughts whit Color”. Expression reaches a peak in the painting “Poems to ML”. With the blues of the sea and the tranquil cameo one can see a dedication to that strong emotion love. There is a sense of drifting while doing everyday events as seen in, “During the Day I dream”, for instance, we see a newspaper clipping amongst “chaos”. The attempt to express these feelings comes out in “I write what I feel”. It is simple, basing itself on the last verse of the very popular book The Prophet by Gibran. However, “all is not well in Camelot.” With the paintings a mini “El Olvido” and “The Poem”, with the poem “To Forget” written out, one sees how intense a struggle can be with a relationship that is starting to become difficult. The last painting of this series “The En or the Beginning” one sees stamps, sign of travel and an arrow, as if trying to point to the way one’s heart must take.

In those I call “Hurt”, the artist shows us how a superficial attempt to deal with the apparent loss of someone significant can be made not by forgetting but by expression. “Sadness”, the two “The Clouds Weep” and “Goodbye my Love: at test to these strong feelings. The attempt I feel is superficial because of the “lightness” of the paintings. “Sadness” has whites and pinks with the only intense color, red, being kept in check by a surrounding circle. The “clouds Weep-I” is very colorful on a background of white and turquoise, hardly a sign of depression. “Clouds Weep II” is a bit more somber with more blacks. “Goodbye My Love” in its bareness reflects true emptiness.

However, with the painting "Hopeful Love" there seems to be a shift away from forgetting and possibly towards returning. However, I feel that the return is in fact regression to childhood fantasies. "Rainbow houses I & II", "Impressions of the South", "Liberty", "House with Swing", "Totesque Kadem" (an attempt to replicate the noise of a train), "Portrait of Luisito" are paintings with infantile image. My favorite here is "Rainbow House II or Red". Remembering that the prerequisite to reaching one's unconscious is by bypassing the conscious, returning to childhood is one way this is being met. "Rural View with Cementary and Crosses" seems to foresee the upcoming tumult with its theme of death, and the use of black. There is a final exposure to the initial feeling in the set "I Love All of You I&II" and "You are Part of my Dreams", all together called "Poems to Sea and Light". We see a precursor of the patterns to be unused in the Forget Series: many wave-like patterns in slanted angles.

Thus, in the Love series, one sees how a relation can begin and end. There we see the first attempt to forget. In doing so, there is a regression to child---like fantasies and thus the Hurt series, the small size of the canvasses and attempt to recreate that time when one's emotions were pure, where one could bypass the conscious and be in direct contact with that chaos known as the unconscious. If this excursion into one's childhood is seen as a means of forgetting, obviously one is incorrect. One cannot forget. In trying to do so, those emotions simply simmer and increase in energy. Attempts to stifle simply give more strength. Of course the foray into childhood will actually facilitate the expression of that which needs expression. Thus the shift from small contained drawings to a massive canvas when one enters the Forget Series; from a somewhat more organized form of expression to ultimate disorganization, the complete expression of chaos. However, chaos theory tells us that only healthy systems can tolerate chaos. Life is, thus, allowed to continue via this creative avenue. The painting "To Forget" is the first of the series where one can see an actual expression of this force.

"To Forget" is at once complicated and simple. There are signs of anguish with very strong colors, especially red. Words such as "do not let me down" attest to not wanting to forget. Circles seen in former series are prominent as well as slash spots. It is interesting that the artist included his date of birth. Could he be saying

everyone's life begins at this time, or was he successful in returning to an extremely early stage of development?

The next two paintings seem to reflect a regression to child, e bliss. "I Want to Give You Some Good Love" with the change to tranquil blues, has water – colors and hearts. Big fish are eating small fish. Could the artist be telling us that one needs to merge the concept of separation with fusion? "It is Sure a Wonderful Day" is less intense, as if there is attempt to totally forget the pain. Reds reappear but less frequently.

As can occur in deep introspection, closeness, to God can occur. In "Dialogue with M & God" one can see this encounter. It is a strong painting, with a reamer hence of blues and reds attesting to a struggle between agitation and tranquility. "Dialogue with N & G" while not directly God, has a sense of his goodness with greens pointing to growth and recovery.

"Tears and Smiles" has impressive areas of white, with wonderful circles. I sense introspection that results in the expression of strong moods. "I want to Learn How to Cry" shows the barren landscape of emotions that can result when sadness has never truly been expressed. This is a very impressive painting that has very intrusive black forms that show how much one can try to grasp the concept of how to express sadness.

As if facing sadness might have provoked thoughts of death, the artist tells us to resolve this conflict via a reencounter with God in "I Love Life Because God is life". There is the forbidden apple of knowledge (hurt?), hearts and a stairway to get to Seventh Heaven. The painting is less barren with the sense of flow being more subtle, as if the wound is healing—pinks and whites being leftover scars. In a ecstasy of self realization from the encounter with God we have "I have Everything and Am in Everything". There is a shift from the horizontal patterns to larger areas of colors. The technique of superimposed paintings is evident here. As one sees the underlying painting one seems to be looking off into the infinity of space, thus recreating the sense of elation. To me it also seems as if I am looking at the pathway of the brain or of the unconscious. Could this be the entrance to chaos?

The last painting “Two Thoughts at Once” is the ultimate integration that allows one to come to terms with chaos. One is dark blue with some reds and pinks and the other white and pink with sideways strokes. This painting reflects how involved one can be with the two opposite feelings: hate and love. Two meanings at once were what allowed the painting to reflect creatively the “rush” of the symbol. The ability to deal with two extremes at the same time is how one comes to terms with intense emotions and lets them be expressed without one being devoured.

The journey ends. Has ultimate insight occurred? Is this creativity. When one is sad, one can repress, regress and express all emotions that are provoked when studying Raimundo Figueroa’s work. He, I feel, has been able to successfully tap upon the energy of chaos, reaching out to the end provoking the final realization that both good and bad, hate and love exist at the same time and its “OK”. The feelings are chaotic, and unpredictable, the expression of them in an organized creative fashion in such a way that allow, one to feel the initial chaos that everyone has felt at one time or another, especially when one has loved or being rejected.

Michael A. Woodbury-Fariña

*Psychiatrist
Associate Professor
University of Puerto Rico
Medical Sciences Campus*