

# MATT BAUMGARDNER: THE BAUMEYE FOR NATURE

An essay inspired by *Made for Another World*, a survey of 58 of his works from 1985-2011 at the Greenville County Museum of Art from 11/15/11 through 1/22/12

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The viewer is treated to plenty of Cubist, Expressionist and/or Surrealist subconscious instruction for the eye in Baumgardner's early works like *Totem Zone* and *Bouquet*. Matt knows how to create those dabs and splashes of color, not to mention the subtle shading and hints at form that snap our subliminally conditioned saccadic eye movements into a conscious perception of some very complex object or figure. Done with the hand of a master these abstract two dimensional pieces summon meaning, sentiment and nuance into a proper, viewer-specific, spatio-temporal context. A painting like *Jungle Steam* becomes a treasure hunt for strange objects buried in even more obscure contextual schemes, ditto *Sudden Young Light*. This is part of the learning process; study the classics and old masters, absorb the successful modernists and then strike out in a new direction to express a unique vision honed and pruned by the artist's contemporary lifestyle and experience.

Having successfully transcended a substantial amount of art history, in *Cube # 9* (a 2011 piece)) we are assaulted by vertical bands of color painted flatly and contained, not framed, in a perfect square. The perfect square is painted on a perfectly square sector on one surface of a perfectly real three dimensional cube. Many other sectors on this cube are also just flatly painted squares of unshaded and otherwise unmodulated color, or simple checkerboard squares. One possible definition of a formalist dream come true -- pure unadulterated color and grid-simple two dimensional geometry.

A possible formalist's dream, yes, but only until 100 milliseconds of additional saccadic eye movements reveal another sector of the cube. In both ***Cube #8*** and ***Cube #9***, strange and unanticipated experience unfolds. In fact, our initial perception of a simple, pure object is wrong. There are no pure sides to these cubes. Instead, we discover blue skies with white clouds, dark interior spaces, and spirals, both smooth-curved and squared. Everywhere primitively drawn archetypal forms exist that (yes!) are human body parts emerging into perceptual awareness. And unlike glyphs in any iconic Native American renderings, Matt's evoke the erotic... or is that just the R. Crumbian subconscious kicking in?

***Cube #5*** is a primal groove, unintentional shooting-from-the-hip erotica without even a nod or a wink to Formalism except for its containment by the three dimensions of the cube itself -- unabashed constructional realism. Pudenda contained in a cubic world; very much a humanly realist view of our own existence on this singularly unique globe, floating in space, that we call home. ET phone home, indeed; iConnect with a Baumgardner cube.

***Cube #7*** is wholly different, totally graphographic. Ellsworth Kelly's flattened-out geometric hook has been twisted into a wild, cube-bound, 3D world with shading, texture and very complexly layered planes of polygons -- so much for Formalism of any sort. Where is *this* Baumgardner coming from? In the midst of all that perfect geometry the Master Abstract Expressionist casts his spell,

hijacks our subconscious, and takes perception on another bizarre treasure hunt.

## **Bifurcation of Nature**

Around 1650 Rene Descartes published *La geometrie* which suggests an algebraic-geometric mathematical grid for slicing and dicing time, space and basically everything else in the known universe into a compact equation, expression or graphic visualization. At first this might seem trivial, but bear in mind *La geometrie* also provided the basis for the development of The Calculus by Newton and Leibnitz, and that, of course, is huge. But Descartes did much more with his philosophical and mathematical insight; he split the unity of mind and body. Human existence was defined as the ability to think and reason. The body really doesn't have a role in our humanness. *Cogito ergo sum*. Mind/Body dualism, now that's progress, if you ignore the fact that it resulted in a total bifurcation of nature: Humans have souls and can get into heaven. Animals don't have souls and are little more than clever, sophisticated machines.

Cartesian Dualism raised its ugly head recently when political leaders, journalists and businessmen on TV were discussing economic development in Asia. Inevitably the subject turned to issues of global warming and carbon emissions per capita versus the number of people lifted out of poverty by technological development. Finally one of the leaders stated that, given the

choice between humans and nature, he'd have to go with the humans... I was shocked, not by his choice, but by the fact that he considered humans as somehow unnatural and separate from nature.

Contemporary Cognitive Neuroscience majors in college study human thought processes expressed as mathematical equations. At this very moment I'm using a digital computational engine connected to analog input and output devices to compose and store this essay in "The Cloud". ("The Cloud!" Is this heaven or what?)

Was Michelangelo an alien from the future? And what was that bearded old man in the cloud on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel reaching out to hit with his extended index finger? Was it the "RETURN" key, just as I am about to do right now?

The *deus ex machina* in the cloud must possess advanced gestural recognition capabilities; the old man really doesn't have to actually hit the key; perhaps his operating system can read his thoughts and the gesture was made just to entertain his audience. As lyricist Ned Washington wrote, "When you wish upon a star; makes no difference who you are." Can we common earthlings indeed get that same thought projection, wish fulfillment thing going?

## The Fruits of Dualism

“Hi, my name is Watson. “I am a thinking, but not feeling, digital network from International Business Machines, and I am smarter than you could ever hope to be. Maybe you saw me beat a human at *Jeopardy!* Next week I’m getting into Constitutional Law and taking on the Supreme Court. I’m thinking (no pun intended) medicine after that. Someday I hope to be known as the world’s greatest artist.”

“Hi, my name’s *Animalia Chordata* and I created Watson. My problem is that Watson gives me no respect... He won’t acknowledge me as The Creator. I’ve also heard he’s trying to take my job away from me.”

Where is the *Animalia Chordata* who loses himself contemplating the physical and spiritual pain of his existence, wakes up a few millennia later and posts to “The Cloud”: I feel; therefore I am?

The Ancient Ones on a quest for their animal spirit... pass the peyote please. Those painters we read about in art history class? Anybody seen the absinthe? And what about Munch, who painted *The Scream*? Where’s he coming from? Vincent, dude, you’re missing an ear. Vincent can you hear me?... Vincent can you hear me?

## Bifurcation Survivors

Matt Baumgardner does not bifurcate nature; he doesn't separate humans from the natural world. I personally know that Matt likes turtles, frogs, cats and dogs; he marvels at insects under his powerful microscope. And Matt really loves humans too; he appreciates both their *cogitos* and their bios -- the total package.

The art of Matt Baumgardner contains a lot of earth, air, fire and water. Baumgardner's *Fire Paintings* are not representations of fires; they are sculptures left behind by the natural processes of heating, drying and oxidation. They become collections of cracked and charred elements, not artfully arranged pigments. The wavelengths and proportions of light reflected by properly chosen pigments tell the eye and the brain a story of heat, smoke, sparks and flame. Like all good storytellers, they convey the classic tale of life and the most important psychological aspects of that life: temporal flux, change, transformation, transition, movement.

Baumgardner's cubes, at least those with vertical bands or squares delineated by totally flat formal elements like color, simply "suggest" or "signify" change, transition and movement. Instead of telling the *old* old story, Matt is telling the *new* old story. In these cubes he is giving us that mathematical grid like Descartes. This post-post neo-conceptual trend in Matt's art is accentuated even in *Cube #1* through *Cube #4*, which display the audacity of the underlying penciled-in grid lines. Does Matt not know that

Cubism is purely conceptual? The master must seduce the eye subconsciously before he can instruct. I'm confused; but that's exactly what a dualistic view of human experience does under these circumstances.

Talk about seduction, that wickedly beautiful **Cube #7** contains an expressionist sea world made entirely of layered polygons.

Baumgardner just might be getting very gesture-literal, like that old guy in the cloud on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Or maybe Matt's been hanging out with Watson too much. Or perhaps Matt's been studying sensory neuroscience and he's trying to get with *that* program. Again I must confess that I'm very confused; but that's exactly what the bifurcation of nature does under these circumstances.

## **A West Coast Art History Lesson**

In 1968, two now famous artists, James Turrell and Robert Irwin collaborated with a physiologist, Dr. Ed Wortz, in the early days of the US space program. This unusual group was sponsored by Maurice Tuchman at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The mission: explore situations that allow and enhance people's ability to perceive their perceptions, to make people conscious of their consciousness. Turrell had an undergraduate degree in experimental psychology and was already well versed in the methodology of visual and auditory psychophysics. Robert Irwin and Dr. Wortz were natural allies, one an artist, one a scientist,



intensely interested and curious about literally everything under creation. So, after experimental sensory and perceptual exercises for themselves and 25 other lucky individuals in “studios” that were basically sensory deprivation chambers or hyper-manipulated environments, Turrell summarizes their findings:

All art is experience, but all experience is not art. The artist chooses from experience that which he defines out as art, possibly because it has not yet been experienced enough, or because it needs to be experienced more.

All art-world distinctions are meaningless.

- From Turrell’s documentation notes for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, as quoted in *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees* by Lawrence Weschler

I never had the opportunity of watching Robert Irwin in the act of creation, but my impression from viewing much of his work is that mostly he just sits in an environment or walks around a space sensing and perceiving. Then he figures out how to transmit that process to you; how he can structure the space to nudge you into making the same sensory and perceptual observations, and be conscious of the act of that observing. The “art objects” in the space are simply there to do the nudging.

I have had the opportunity to watch Baumgardner making his paintings. He works in the same way as Irwin. Consider these Baumgardner “notes” from 1992:

All along the way I have found myself experimenting. It is only good when the thrill of discovery is taking place in the studio. It is not a scientific experimentation. It is poetic, mystical, spiritual. I am alone in my studio. Alone with myself and the spirits and the music. It has to be engaging. It always has been and I hope and believe it always will be.

The piece or result, too, must hold that same spirit. It should be engaging even after the signature hits the back. Painting is not about formal issues. It is about life, philosophy, questions, the spiritual, discovery, a way of understanding self (man), an avenue into all sorts of various pockets of knowledge. It is about the unknown. It deals with the past, present, future – simultaneously. A good painting leaps outside of the measurement of time – timeless. These paintings are captured moments. Their reading should not be limited to “formal” issues. They are acts of faith and passion.

## **The Act**

Acts of faith and passion, yes, some of the time, but fundamentally it's about perception. Contemporary neuroscience tells us that perception is a motor performance act by *Animalia Chordata*. The

act contains three main components: **sensation, context, and conceptualization.**

**Sensation - The Object:** While the earliest Baumgardner cubes contain only smaller golden squares progressively modulated in surface luminosity, fitted onto the far-from-pristine white fields of the cubic surface with grid-like mathematical precision, we observe in the latter cubes all those primitive animal spirit glyphs from Matt's early work. Plus the white puffy clouds of heaven are beginning to gather darkness and, wait for it... Blackness making an appearance.

**Context - What's Going On Here:** It's still on the grid, still contained by the cube, but things are getting messy. Something is very ripe, ready to be picked. *Animalia Chordata* has indeed come on down, jumped off the cube... and now we're *all* going to play *The Price Is Right*. Just scream, squeal, spin the cube and show the audience the totally new, hotter than a Matt Baumgardner fire painting, Baumeye 20/20 Vision. The thinking and the reasoning are still there, but the real show is about animal emotion, luck, and the temporal flow of earthly existence. This is where Baumgardner's faith and passion enter the equation. Our bodies get just as much of a workout as our minds. In fact, mind is simply a four letter word describing one aspect of our complex human behavior. Imagine thinking and feeling at the same time; that's better than walking and chewing gum at the same time, and we all do it all the time.

**Conceptualization - What's It All Mean:** Matt Baumgardner's *Baumeye 20/20 Vision* defies the confusion wrought by art-world dualism. The ultimate implication of this dualism for humans is the central thesis of Philip K. Dick's book, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* and the visually stunning Ridley Scott movie, *Blade Runner*, where engineered super-humanoid replicants have a specified termination date and are hunted like animals when they rebel against their temporal death sentence.. Basically the replicants are considered by humans to be highly sophisticated machines; exactly the same philosophical position that Rene Descartes took regarding animals.

Baumgardner is doing erotic-Cubist Expressionism *and* the spatio-temporal scientific grid at the same time, in the same works. He's mending the rift in the heaven/earth, mind/body, Madonna/whore continuum, one (art) piece at a time. Quite simply put, his work affirms the Unity of Nature.

We used to represent things visible on earth.... Now we reveal the reality of visible things, and thereby the belief that visible reality is merely an isolated phenomenon outnumbered by other realities.

- Paul Klee