



(from left) *Where the Angels Play*. 60 x 60 in. © 2104 Estate of Matthew Baumgardner; *Grand Mystique*. 60 x 90 in. © 2002 Estate of Matthew Baumgardner; photograph of Baumgardner in his studio, courtesy of the Estate of Matthew Baumgardner.



The Eternal Art

The late painter Matt Baumgardner chose to dance where the angels play

/by Jack Bacot

Creative Calling:

(left to right) *Where the Angels Play* and *Grand Mystique* are two works by contemporary artist Matt Baumgardner (opposite right), who left behind a rich creative legacy when he passed away last November.

There’s a point in the evolution of an artist where the creative soul battles the tug of demons and the angelic offerings of good. It’s a given. It’s a dance where sometimes the demons lead and sometimes the angels lead. The one left holding the dance card gets to choose to accept or pass on who gets the next dance—or so we think.

Matthew Clay Baumgardner embraced this dance. You could see it in the twinkle of his eyes, that crooked smirk, the “do you get it” look on his face. His manners were impeccable as he would politely ask each of us “to dance” with his art. But this dance rambled from Fred Astaire’s ballroom style, to the psychedelic, to disco, to line dancing; from classic ballet to a breakdance resembling a scribbling free-for-all.

The real winners, of course, are those of us in the audience who get to watch the dance, get a taste of the chef’s feast, witness the artist’s tantrums, the arguments between good and evil, the splash of colors, the wobbly textures, the sublime, the spiritual blessings of art on paper, on wood, on canvas that ended with the smashing of

colors and materials spilling a vision that we are left to interpret. “The first demand any work of any art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way,” explained C.S. Lewis, one of Baumgardner’s inspirational guides.

Baumgardner’s style is drawn from representations of invisible forces from a variety of spiritual movements suggesting all are in some way dancing together. His work displays an understanding of modernism and his role as a contemporary artist. It seems he wanted to create a unified moral and metaphysical view that allows the eye to find its own way through the art’s patterns and structure, guided by symbols and antiquities.

If you look closely you will easily note the inspiration of Pablo Picasso, the vision of Paul Klee, the spiritual influence of Hilma af Klint, and the voice of C.S. Lewis rattling through his work. Baumgardner’s art continues to project into the future, reshaping possibilities of expression and intent. Or as Baumgardner once said, “A great painting becomes a mirror of the self.”



(left) *Inner Sanctum*, 22 1/2 x 16 3/8 in. © 2018 Estate of Matthew Baumgardner.



(top) *Spirit in the Sky*, #5, 35 x 32 in. © 2015 Estate of Matthew Baumgardner; (right) *New Magic in a Dusy World*, 90 x 60 in. © 1988 Estate of Matthew Baumgardner.



(bottom) *Gossip Column*, 84 x 88 in. © 1985 Estate of Matthew Baumgardner.



(top) *Found Cube*, #9, 3 1/2 x 3 1/2 x 3 1/2 in. © 2012 Estate of Matthew Baumgardner; (bottom) *Spirit in the Sky*, #5, 35 x 32 in. © 2015 Estate of Matthew Baumgardner; (right) *New Magic in a Dusy World*, 90 x 60 in. © 1988 Estate of Matthew Baumgardner.




“Since very early childhood, I have loved creating Noumena that engage and heal me,” stated Baumgardner in his artist’s statement. “My work encompasses the sacred and profane, simultaneous textural contrast and spatial frequency as it directly relates to visual perception. Different spatial representations or modalities convey varied information, affecting individuals’ assimilation of their surroundings,” he added.

In 2012, Baumgardner celebrated a major retrospective of his work at the Greenville County Museum of Art, though in the last few years, the artist rarely ventured out in public. He was most comfortable in his studio surrounded by nature and the familiar, photos of his four daughters and their many drawings that he framed and proudly displayed. His studio is filled with books—art and literary volumes. His paints are painstakingly organized by color almost as an art installation itself, along with his tools, brushes, and trowels giving the impression that his studio doubles as an extremely well-organized construction site. He would welcome collectors, art representatives, and gallery owners to view his vast collection of work. He meticulously organized all of his art, even the notes he took or scribbled are organized by time, date, and place in years marked by years. His studio is a warehouse of color and imagination.

His art is guided by a strong spiritual center that was occasionally tested by the dark demons that lounge in our creative souls. Like most artists he ventured over to taste the offerings and learned the hard lesson that the dangers are real.

Those experiences open an artist to the other side of the canvas and provide inspiration to push limits. “A good painting,” Picasso once explained, “ought to bristle with razor blades.” Baumgardner took this to heart and often used blades to mold and shape his paintings as he scraped the heavy coats of pigmented gypsum, i.e. his signature “mud,” to uncover new layers of color. The new layers always found their spiritual place.

Baumgardner was born and graduated high school in Columbus, Ohio, growing up in northeast. He ventured south for college and completed his MFA in painting at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1982 and received a National Endowment for the Arts Visual Arts Fellowship in Painting in 1993. He took up residence in NYC for twenty-two years, before landing in Travelers Rest, South Carolina, designing and building a home studio in 2006, where he lived, meditated, and created art until his passing in November 2018. His art lives on. 

Celestial Realms:
A Celebration of Life
tribute is planned for Matt Baumgardner on March 23, at 1:30pm in the courtyard at Hotel Domestique, a collector and venue for viewing his artwork. **Hotel Domestique, 10 Road of Vines, Travelers Rest.**

Stay tuned for an upcoming retrospective of Baumgardner’s art in 2019. To view more, go to **baumgardnerart.com** or Instagram at **@mattbaumgardnerart**

Matt Baumgardner’s Career Solo Exhibitions
2012 Greenville County Museum of Art, “Made for Another World”
2002 Bentley Gallery / Scottsdale, Arizona
2002 Jeffery Coploff Fine Art / New York City
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1998 MD Modern / Houston, Texas
1998 Bentley Gallery / Scottsdale, Arizona
1995 Carrie Secrist Gallery / Chicago, Illinois
1993 Charles Cowles Gallery / New York City
1992 Howard Yexerski Gallery / Boston, Massachusetts
1989 Wessel O’Connor Ltd., “Totem and Taboo” / New York City
1988 Wessel O’Conner Ltd. / New York City
1987 Wilkov/Goldfeder / New York City
1981 Sumter Gallery / Sumter, South Carolina
1980 Presbyterian College / Clinton, South Carolina
1979 Gallery of Art / Panama City, Florida