

Martin Lawes – Oil Paintings

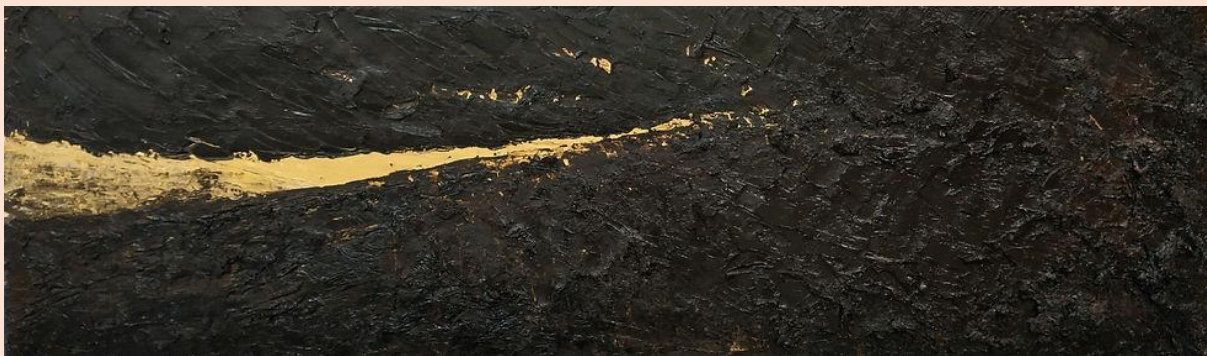
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Creating art through 'becoming music'

Painting title: Ohjeru - Lumen Naturae 1

Music used: Tallis - *Lamentations* (extract)

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Syn85dfJKGs6cGCywnigufbmnSZ3BFii/view?usp=sharing>



This was painted listening repeatedly to the final minute and a half of the first of Tallis' *Lamentations 1*, where the composer, writing in the 1560s, sets an Old Testament biblical text which describes the desolation of Jerusalem following its destruction. Tallis intended his setting to be used during the Tenebrae service on Maundy Thursday in Holy Week. The words set in the extract I used are "*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, convertere ad Dominum Deum tuum* (Jerusalem, Jerusalem, return to the Lord your God)", the music sorrowful but also sublimely beautiful.

In the Christian tradition, Tenebrae services are associated with moving through darkness and death into rebirth at Easter. Death-rebirth is nevertheless not simply a Christian but also a universal theme to be found in many different religious, spiritual and other traditions, Eastern and Western, pagan and orthodox. In nature, the progression through autumn and winter into spring each year is also a movement through death into rebirth.

Associated with this death-rebirth theme, my painting and several others have *lumen naturae* in the title with which I have various different interlinked associations. I discuss these next before adding a few comments about the painting itself.

Alchemy, Jung and the *lumen naturae*

One obscure but important ancient tradition in which this theme of death-rebirth is prominent is alchemy, a kind of mystical chemistry practiced in centuries past which was the forerunner of modern chemistry, where the aim was transform base metals into gold, cure disease and prolong life. In the twentieth century, Carl Jung the Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist understood alchemy as psychological metaphor. He believed that images of gold in alchemical texts and in his client's dreams, for example, were symbolic expressions of the origin and goal of individuation. This is the process of becoming whole as a human being in which opposites such as light and dark are brought together and indeed transcended.

In alchemy, as psychologically understood by Jung, *lumen naturae* can be associated with the experience of an innate, hidden light within darkness which guides, animates, and structures psychic, natural, and dream life. This 'light of nature', where darkness itself is

experienced to be self-luminous, needs to be distinguished from external, intellectual, or divine light which indeed obscures the former. The experience of the *lumen naturae*, which may come in times of prolonged inner darkness, suffering and despair (death), transcends the everyday experience of light and dark being opposites which has dominated Western consciousness and orthodox Western Religious traditions where the forces of light (god) and darkness (devil) are understood to be in conflict. Transcending such a dualistic paradigm, the *lumen naturae* is apprehended to be “no longer light’s contrary but a point of possibility in which light and dark both have their invisible origin” (Marlan, 2005, *The black sun: The alchemy and art of darkness*, p. 209).

Levy in his article *The Light of Darkness* suggests that “to see the light that is hidden in the darkness is to become conscious, which, alchemically speaking, frees the spirit that is hidden and trapped inside the materialized world ... The *lumen naturae* is not the light that we see, it is the invisible light by which we see”. Elaborating this, Jung in his *Alchemical Studies* describes how the medieval alchemist

was seeking for something that would give him a hold on the dark, body-bound nature of man, on the soul which, intangibly interwoven with the world and with matter, appeared before itself in the terrifying form of strange, demoniacal figures and seemed to be the secret source of life-shortening diseases. The Church might exorcise demons and banish them, but that only alienated man from his own nature, which, unconscious of itself, had clothed itself in these spectral forms. Not separation of the natures but union of the natures was the goal of alchemy ... This principle is pagan in feeling and an expression of nature worship. Nature not only contains a process of transformation - it is itself transformation. It strives not for isolation but for union ... Here the opposites unite what the light from above had sternly divided.

The death-rebirth rhythm of creativity

Death-rebirth also features in the way the creative process in the arts is understood by Anton Ehrenzweig in his seminal 1967 publication *The Hidden Order of Art*. To create an aesthetic satisfying and meaningful painting resonant of the depths of human experience, Ehrenzweig describes how the artist needs to surrender everyday conscious functioning and control to ‘the powers of the deep’. As a result of this inner ‘death’, the artist enters a ‘waking dream state’ in which they ‘become their painting’ experientially, feeling as if it is almost a part of them. In this state, relying more on unconscious than conscious processes, the artist develops and integrates all the painting’s different elements to create a satisfying whole that is more than the sum of its parts. The painting becomes imbued with subjectivity in the process as rebirth is experienced.

The creative arts function to open consciousness to dream ‘awake’. As a result of the type of creative surrender discussed, a painting as ‘vehicle of dream’ can generate a deeper sense of *Reality, Truth, and Presence* than is normally experienced not only for the artist but potentially for the viewer also. In this way, successfully integrated art works can affirm both the light and dark aspects of life, whether as internally or externally experienced, beyond what may otherwise be possible.

A successful painting in the sense discussed is experienced to have a boundless/infinite depth that is simultaneously enveloping and expanding. This reflects what the artist experiences where at unconscious depth opposites such as life and death are undifferentiated. Whilst the associated sense of envelopment may potentially threaten as entrapment in death (and the painting repulse the viewer in this aspect), this is balanced by a sense of limitless freedom and expansion associated with rebirth that transcends the limitations of individuality, space and time. As a ‘vehicle of dream’, the artwork functions as a kind of creative womb, or rather as a potential tomb that becomes womb once the work is fully integrated and death-rebirth has been worked through.

Associated with this type of experience of art is also the sense of a painting having an endless meaningfulness that can never be exhausted however often it is looked at. The painting

has a life of its own where the essential meaning is both before and beyond words, is at once personal and universal, and inexhaustible. Through the type of creative process described, a painting exists as an irreducible integrated totality that cannot be reduced to its parts. The painting presents lived experience in a way which can have no other form or expression. Words may be able to embellish the painting, but they cannot be substituted for it. Indeed, trying to capture the essential meaning of such a painting in words only diminishes it.

In this inexhaustible meaningfulness of a painting as irreducible totality, undifferentiated aspects of form-play are often important. Where an old master painting may 'on the surface' be composed of differentiated elements of form such as people, objects, buildings, and landscape associated with its representational meaning – standing up close the brushwork may look messy, crude, unfinished and undifferentiated, more like an abstract painting. If the artist had attempted to tidy up the paintwork to 'improve' the painting, they would have killed its 'life'. In some contemporary painting, undifferentiated form-play is more dominant 'on the surface'. For example, in a great abstract painting by Jackson Pollock there may be no obvious elements of representational form. The work may nevertheless feel very alive when the viewer is able to intimate that some ineffable rhythm seems to underpin and run through its apparent surface chaos. The painting has a *hidden order* as Ehrenzweig describes of all art resonant of the depths of human experience, whether a Rembrandt self-portrait, a Van Gogh landscape or such an abstract painting. Every element connects and interpenetrates with every other as part of the painting as integrated, irreducible whole.

Paleolithic cave art

In his seminal publication *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art*, Lewis-Williams discusses his controversial but also fascinating theory of palaeolithic cave painting which began to appear in western Europe around 45,000 years ago. He associates this earliest flowering of human art-making with shamanic experience in altered states of consciousness (trance/dream states) resulting in visions of animals that had spiritual significance. These visionary experiences he believes occurred in the darkness of the caves into which the shamanic practitioners ventured and which they then painted on the cave walls. Lewis-Williams believes these earliest spiritual practitioners (priests) experienced the cave walls to represent a membrane between their world and the spirit world from which the visions seemed to come. When lit by torch light the painted images might easily seem to appear and disappear out of the cave wall as the light fell on them.

In shamanism, death-rebirth experience is central. It can be associated with profound spiritual transformation where an individual sheds old identities, traumas, and fears to be 'reborn' with greater wisdom, power, and connection to the spiritual realm. The shaman lets go of the old self to align with a more authentic, integrated experience of living - similar to natural cycles of decay and renewal.

Filmmaker Werner Herzog, discussing his film about Paleolithic cave art, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, describes the caves to represent for him 'the awakening of the modern human soul'. Margaret Iversen in her essay *Sculpting Darkness*, refers to contemporary sculptor Anthony Gormley's interest in Paleolithic cave art, where he describes how his own work potentially resonates with "deep memories or structures to do with birth and death: the womb and the tomb". In this, art can potentially transform consciousness by invoking the analogy between entering the mysterious space of a cave and entering the dark inner space of the imagination, caves representing the portal to the unconscious mind and experiences of primordial spirituality, where the experience of simultaneous envelopment/entrapment-expansion/freedom described by Ehrenzweig is apparently also a central preoccupation of Gormley's.

Ohjeru - Lumen Naturae 1

In this painting, there is an undifferentiated theme of light and dark that I associate with the resonance of the music, the text, and the various associations discussed. Is the light - or is

alchemical gold - coming or going? It is in a sense both. Is it an external landscape or an internal one - is the painting most essentially about darkness or light – again both at the level of the painting’s inexhaustible, undifferentiated meaningfulness. It is about the desolation of loss, about fully accepting it’s impossible and unwanted reality, but also about finding something essential and surprising within the associated darkness where the experience becomes sublime and transcendent. The painting is for me most subjectively alive and nurturing within its dominant textured cave like darkness where entrapping tomb (death) paradoxically has become creative womb (rebirth) that is endlessly expansive, the darkness of the painting itself appearing self-luminous in the right light, this too an important aspect.

General background information about my approach to painting

As a creative arts psychotherapist and practitioner of Music and Imagery (MI), a psychotherapeutic approach which involves supporting clients to create art-work whilst listening to music to explore their inner experience, I have developed my own practice as an oil painter using a similar technique which integrates art-making with music listening.

My paintings involve my being intuitively drawn to music which I then listen to repeatedly whilst I paint. For this I use short extracts of music that is especially meaningful to me, each extract lasting around a minute and a half. I typically repeat such an extract for several hours at a time as I work on a painting, the process often repeated on many different occasions over a period of weeks and sometimes months until the painting is finished. Repeating the music never feels like repeating the same experience. Rather it is a way of ever deepening into the present moment experience of the music until I feel that I have 'become the music' in a way that transforms my state of consciousness. It is only out of this that the painting emerges authentically in the way I work. 'Becoming the music' involves feeling immersed in it as though I am living within the music, continually aware of its transformative presence.

Titles and meanings

The titles of my paintings are intended to be both evocative and ambiguous, so as not to convey a precise meaning but be open to many possibilities of interpretation. I don't consider the paintings to represent the music but to arise from my having 'become it' in a way that is personal to me as I explore universal human themes. There is often a connection with the music's meaning for the composer, or a connection with the text set, though this may not be immediately obvious. It is in any case for the viewer to create their own possibly very different meaning.

I will end with a favourite quotation about meaning in art which gets to what is most essential I believe. This comes from Ken Wilber's 2001 publication *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad*:

Let me return to what art is finally all about. When I directly view, say, a great Van Gogh, I am reminded of what all superior art has in common: the capacity to simply take your breath away . . . you are changed somehow, maybe just a little, maybe a lot; but you are changed. No wonder that for the East and West alike, until recent times, art was often associated with profound spiritual transformation.

. . . When we look at any beautiful object (natural or artistic), we suspend all other activity, and we are simply aware, we only want to contemplate the object. . . In that contemplative awareness, our egoic grasping in time comes momentarily to rest. We relax into our basic awareness. We rest with the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. We are face to face with the calm, the eye in the centre of the storm. We are not agitating to change things; we contemplate the object as it is. Great art has this power to grab your attention and suspend it: we stare, sometimes awestruck, sometimes silent, but we cease the restless movement that otherwise characterises our every waking moment.

It doesn't matter what the actual content of the art is; not for this. Great art grabs you, against your will, and then suspends your will. You are ushered into a quiet clearing, free of desire, free of grasping, free of ego, free of self-contradiction. And through that opening or clearing in your own awareness may come flashing higher truths, subtler revelations, profound connections. For a moment you might even touch eternity; who can say otherwise, when time itself is suspended in the clearing that great art creates in your awareness?

. . . Great art suspends the reverted eye, the lamented past, the anticipated future: we enter with it into the timeless present; we are with God today, perfect in our manner and mode, open to the riches and the glories of a realm that time forgot, but that great art reminds us of: not by its content, but by what it does in us: suspends the desire to be elsewhere. And thus it undoes the agitated grasping in the heart of the suffering self, and releases us - maybe for a second, maybe for a minute, maybe for all eternity - releases us from the coil of ourselves.

That is exactly the state that great art pulls us into, no matter what the actual content of the art itself - bugs or Buddhas, landscapes or abstractions, it doesn't matter in the least. In this particular regard - from this particular context, great art is judged by its capacity to take your breath away, take your self away, take time away, all at once.

And whatever we mean by the word "spirit" - let us just say . . . that for each of us it involves our ultimate concern - it is in that simple awestruck moment, when great art enters you and changes you, that spirit shines in this world just a little more brightly than it did the moment before. (Wilber 2001: 122-124)