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**Musing About Pareidolic Impulses  
an underdeveloped topic in contemporary painting theory.**

Abstract: Perceptual psychology calls the pre-linguistic impulses to “see” images in otherwise undifferentiated fields of visual stimulus pareidolia. Such pareidolic perceptions have long been used by children, artists and others for inspiration and simple diversion. Even Leonardo Da Vinci gained inspiration through gazing at water stains on the ceiling over his bed. Religious fanatics report “seeing” the Virgin in tree bark, cloud formations or on burned tortillas. Max Ernst’s dreamed up landscapes by gazing at frottages. This paper will discuss the struggle painters have in yielding to or resisting this impulse in studio practice and the ways in which the viewer completes a given work, albeit an abstract one, by their pareidolic associations.

Proposal: I will also discuss the internal dialog a painter inevitably deals with in navigating the tension between cognitively “named” and concrete though latent “abstract” imagery in the formation of their work. Discussed in terms proper to Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein (intuition, noesis, noema, seeing-as and aspect blindness) I intend to show a gradient of imagery from my own work that ranges from proto-pareidolic fields of latency, to deliberately enhanced pareidolic imagery, and still other more purely abstract work that is relatively free of such conceits, however tenuously, only to be frequently “named” by the viewer in unexpected ways. I will assert that it is in this tension that artistic intentionality is discovered, given full range and moreover that a painter’s stance relative to pareidolic impulses is formative in their artistic sensibility. [1].

## Musing About Pareidolic Impulses; an underdeveloped aspect of painting theory

Contemporary painting theory, and alas, its teaching, tends to be more ideological and conceptual, per se, than it is psychologically descriptive of what painters actually experience. Fundamental to giving form to a work is a perennial psychological phenomenon that we might do well to intellectually acknowledge.

Perceptual psychology calls an imagined perception of a pattern or image where it does not actually exist *pareidolia*. This term is an important conceptual and linguistic cornerstone in beginning to establish a working description of what painters do and experience in their visual cortex and through rich related associations. To some degree painters ultimately accept, reject or incorporate pareidolic influences, sometimes oscillating between creation *sui generis*, from a conceptual basis, or by working through process, one that I contend frequently engages pareidolic influences back and forth as the surface .

These impulses to “see” images in otherwise undifferentiated fields of visual stimulus, what Da Vinci called “a jumble of things” are ubiquitous in human imagination and, I contend constitute a significant bridge between imaginal reverie and naming the world. Pareidolic perceptions and the reverie involved have of course long been used by children, artists and others for inspiration and simple diversion. In fact, paleolithic cave painters were evidently inspired plastically by fissures and swells in rock formations as they rendered animals, both naturalistic and fantastical. Far from imagery being projected primarily through mental projection or naturalistic verisimilitude alone, such paintings would seem to have been to some degree emergent from surfaces through a process, in effect collaborative with existing incidental visual features of the natural world. To borrow terms from Aristotle and later alchemy, the *chaos* of nature is treated as psychic *prima materia* (the passive principle), giving way through artistic engagement to the active *ultima materia*, the image-word.

In his Treatise on Painting, Da Vinci wrote:

*"As the master Boticelli stated, such a study (of cloud studies in this case) is useful because just by throwing a sponge soaked with various colors against a wall to make a stain, one can find a beautiful landscape. If it is true that in this stain various inventions can be discerned, or rather what one wants to find in it, such as battles, reefs, seas, clouds, forests and other similar things, then surely, this is like the ringing of bells in which one can understand whatever one wants to. But, even though these smears of color provide you with inventions, they also show you that they do not come to represent anything in particular.*

*It should not be hard for you to stop sometimes and look into the stains of walls, or ashes of a fire, or clouds, or mud or like places, in which... you may find really marvellous ideas.*

*Don't underestimate this idea of mine, which calls to mind that it would not be too much of an effort to pause sometimes to look into these stains on walls, the ashes from the fire, the clouds, the mud, or other similar places. If these are well contemplated, you will find fantastic inventions that awaken the genius of the painter to new inventions, such as compositions of battles, animals, and men, as well as diverse composition of landscapes, and monstrous things, as devils and the like. These will do you well because they will awaken genius with this jumble of things.*

Yet the pareidolic impulse born of gazing into Da Vinci's "jumble of things" has much broader application to the issue of naming the world than a device an artist might use to invoke imagination. We know from the popular press that religious fanatics continue to report "seeing" images the wish to see, such as the Virgin in the bark of a tree, cloud formations or on burned tortillas. The important distinction is that they *believe* what they think they see is reality. The artist *knows* he or she is creating.

Surrealist Max Ernst's dreamed up *automatistic* landscapes by gazing at *frottages*, dealing with what came to be known as *paranoiac vision*. In his

famous manifesto *The Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924 and later his 1933 essay *The Automatic Message (Le Message Automatique)* Ernst expounded on the links between the unconscious, revealed through *psychic automatism* and *paranoiac vision vis-a-vis* and the everyday rational naming mind.

Painters yield through claiming and developing pareidolic suggestions and impulses or sometimes struggle to resist them in studio practice. What interests me, and what I experience as a painter, is a dynamic proto-named, proto-pareidolic field of possibilities to be navigated in the creative process as one's internal dialog and optic as a painter "sees" what is pareidolically emergent, available and seductive. What is a painter doing when they resist "seeing" imagery in their work? Indeed, once seen pareidolic imagery is hard to not see.

The following is a story told by Pablo Picasso, as quoted in Francoise Gilot (his former wife) and Carlton Lake, *Life with Picasso*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964, pp. 76-77—

*I remember one evening I arrived at George Braque's studio. He was working on a large oval still life with a package of tobacco, a pipe, and all the usual paraphernalia of Cubism. I looked at it, drew back and said, "My poor friend, this is dreadful. I see a squirrel in your canvas." Braque said, "That's not possible." I said, "Yes, I know, it's paranoiac vision, but it so happens that I see a squirrel. That canvas is made to be a painting, not an optical illusion. Since people need to see something in it, you want them to see a package of tobacco, a pipe, and the other things you're putting in. But for God's sake, get rid of that squirrel." Braque stepped back a few feet and looked carefully and sure enough, he too saw the squirrel, because that kind of paranoiac vision is extremely communicable. Day after day Braque fought that squirrel. He changed the structure, the light, the composition, but the squirrel always came back, because once it was in our minds it was almost impossible to get it out. However different the forms became, the squirrel somehow always managed to return. Finally, after eight or ten days, Braque was able to turn the trick and the canvas again became a package of tobacco, a pipe, a deck of cards, and above all a Cubist painting.*

Other painters might have incorporated the squirrel. This seems to me to illustrate a triumph of rational will over unconscious visionary impulses. Braque's will to create a Cubist painting, as a pre-determined goal, eventually won but at what cost?

Discussed in terms proper to Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein (intuition, noesis, noema, seeing-as and aspect blindness) I intend to show a gradient of imagery from my own work that ranges from proto-pareidolic fields of latency, to deliberately enhanced pareidolic imagery, and still other more purely abstract work that is relatively free of such conceits, however tenuously, only to be frequently "named" by the viewer in unexpected ways. I will assert that it is in this tension that artistic intentionality is discovered, given full range and moreover that a painter's stance relative to pareidolic impulses is formative in their artistic sensibility. [1].

[1] In *Ideas I* (Book One, 1913) Husserl introduced two Greek words to capture his version of the Bolzanoan distinction: noesis and noema, from the Greek verb *noēō* (νοέω), meaning to perceive, think, intend, whence the noun *nous* or mind). The intentional process of consciousness is called noesis, while its ideal content is called noema. The noema of an act of consciousness Husserl characterized both as an ideal meaning and as "the object as intended". Thus the phenomenon, or object-as-it-appears, becomes the noema, or object-as-it-is-intended. The interpretations of Husserl's theory of noema have been several and amount to different developments of Husserl's basic theory of intentionality. (Is the noema an aspect of the object intended, or rather a medium of intention?)

This is great, Ron. It is an issue that you've danced around for several years—it's good to see you dive right in and engage directly in writing.

Are you familiar with Wittgenstein's concepts of "seeing as" and "aspect blindness" from the 2<sup>nd</sup> part of the *Philosophical Investigations*? W offers an

additional way of taking about the pareidolic impulse that may serve as a fine counterpoint to Husserl.

**Prima Materia** is, according to [alchemists](#), the alleged primitive formless base of all matter, given particular manifestation through the influence of [forms](#). The concept is sometimes attributed to [Aristotle](#).<sup>[1]</sup> The alchemical operation consists essentially in separating the prima materia, the so-called [Chaos](#), into the active principle, the soul, and the passive principle, [Mind-body dichotomy](#) the body. They are then reunited in personified form in the [coniunctio](#), the ritual combination of sol and Luna, which yields the magical child — [filius philosophorum](#) — the reborn self, known as the ultima materia.

The proto-pareidolic “jumble of things”, the *prima materia*, as opposed to the ultima materia once differentiation has occurred, as is attributed to Aristotle.

Artist as creator, letting the viewer co-create. How I work. Gestalt, completing a partial vision.

Paradox, two models of creativity, visionary activity: one *sui generis*, one collaborative with the field. Painting provides multiple possible resolutions, non of which are definitive, the viewer completes. Surrealism gives impossible realities, paradoxes that are unresolvable.