

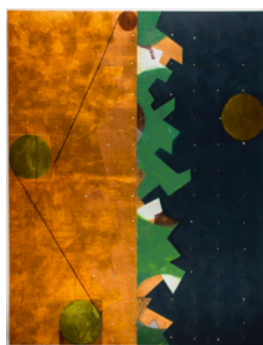
STEVE JOY *THE DIVIDE*

An excerpt from Steve Joy, 2017, published by Galerie Erich Storrer, Zurich, with additional illustrations.



Cells split in half. One line divides a canvas. A diptych is organized across its divide.

(Federico da Montefeltro gazes forever at his dead wife, Battista.¹)



Steve Joy often begins with a line, centered, from which all else seems to develop. *Gods Engines*, 2016, is divided in half, into two worlds or perhaps two heavens. On the left, a schematic arrangement of three circles connected by thin lines stretch across a golden expanse reminiscent of a Byzantine chapel. On the right, a chaotic array of irregular shapes seem to be kicking free of that centerline onto a deep, verdian firmament. That darkness fades into the distance, but rather than the expected celestial starscape, this midnight is oddly punctuated by that twentieth century sense of strict order, the grid. It subdivides space into discreet units then illuminates it indifferently. I feel I am looking onto two versions of infinity; one transcendent, the other plotted mathematically. The fractured forms, however, exist in the present. A moment is suggested by this unearthly juxtaposition, perhaps a parable.



One of my first encounters with Steve Joy's paintings was through, *Byzantium Black Sea*, 2009; a resplendent, solidly built construction that suggested, through rectangular forms reverberating with color and veils of golden dammar, a complex but familiar sense of order. Unlike the grid in *Gods Engines*, this one expanded and contracted naturalistically in accommodation of my desire for harmony and variation. I imagine an ancient monastery high atop a rocky outcrop in the dusk. The network of horizontals and verticals seem tuned to some universal order, like that of a Greek temple or an early Mondrian.² Much has been beautifully written of Joy's art and its roots in Byzantine icon painting: those sublime pathways, for the believer, to communion with eternity. *Gods Engines*, with its celestial glimmer, appears to operate on a similarly rarefied level, but naturalism is here displaced by something more automatous. And those highly animated, irregular shapes revolt against any order, universal or otherwise.



Three other paintings, *Fables of the Reconstruction*, *Construction-Reception*, and *Deconstruction-Rejection*, entail similar disturbances that appear to erupt forcefully along a central divide. There is a sense of escape, as from a too-restrictive constraint. The same cacophony that disturbs the cosmic calm of *Gods Engines* is from a too-restrictive constraint. But while the shapes are disruptive, there is also a familiar formality that ties them (kicking and screaming) to Joy's more reflective oeuvre. The lapidary colors red, blue and green, white and gold, are woven in and out of these new, writhing forms just as they are in the becalmed compositions of squares and rectangles like *Byzantium Black Sea*.



The intensity and depth of color is similar, and the gold leaf and amber pools of varnish reappear as well. But in *Fables of the Reconstruction*, as in *Gods Engines*, those forms appear fractured and crowded. Joy's regular quadrilateral shapes are reconfigured into new, unpredictable geometries. What is this disruption? Byzantine debris? The shrapnel of an exploding dawn? An imploding eternity?



In the long history of western art there is a cycle of classical rationality and explosive energy that might be helpful here. Polykleitos's *Canon* laid down a rule of proportion that sought to align the body of man with mathematical certainty and musical harmony, but it was only a short time before his rules were updated in favor of the intense drama of the *Laocoon*. Or consider the two great statues of David, Michelangelo's colossal expression of energy trumped by thought, soon supplanted by Bernini's whirling action figure, dripping with sweat and fervor. More recently, Mondrian's prescription of horizontal and verticals defined De Stijl, until his partner, Theo van Doesburg, threw in the uncertainty of a diagonal, thus ending their relationship. Joy's new painting, in their volatile remix of color and form, can be seen as reflective of this art historical cycle.



The work draws particularly upon Cubism. That volatile remix took place during the six months in which Pablo Picasso secretly dismantled the western tradition of representation with *Les Femmes d'Alger*, which he referred to as his "first exorcism painting." The demons unleashed fed on the fractured spaces and shards of drapery between what was left of the grand tradition of the female nude: 2400 years of beauty and sensuality summarily condensed to a geometric decoction of razor-sharp limbs and primal glares. It was shocking and completely unpalatable to the few viewers who Picasso allowed to see it, so he rolled it up and stuck it in a corner of the studio. But the genie had left the bottle, as they say. Pandora's box was open. Modern art had become as radical and as unforeseen as modern life in the twentieth century.

The early twentieth century's view of materiality was challenged by the invention of x-rays, the discovery of the atom, and talk of a higher, unseen fourth dimension of space as discussed in the Picasso's studio⁴ long before Einstein named time as the fourth dimension and theorized its relativity to space. It has been argued that cubism was a kind of intuitive mapping of the new physics: territory that did not submit to humanism's one-point perspective.⁴ To keep up with the modern world, it interrogated nature from multiple perspectives, cinematically deconstructing its subject in an effort to be relevant, to be modern.

Steve Joy's work has always interrogated his subjects, which include spirituality, the history of art, and the world as seen and sensed through a lifetime of travel. But these new works seem to also cross-examine the form and meaning of his own past paintings. Joy seems to be approaching his method of working similarly to the way

Picasso analyzed, then demolished, the familiar forms of western art. The materials remain the same, but the underlying structure of the image is reimagined, this time in tune with a twenty-first century world order. What is essential to the spirit of our own age? And how does it relate to continued developments in science and technology? Could *Fables of the Reconstruction* represent a dystopian Jacob's ladder? Or is it, perhaps, a protean figure, born of some newly rendered nature? Or perhaps Joy is remapping our desire for transcendence in a world more tuned to clouds of data than stars in the universe.



The poet, Apollinaire, who chronicled the early days of Cubism, wrote of painting as a "luminous language" and the line as "the voice of light."⁵ He believed that a painting must "embrace at a glance the past, present and future" and "present that essential unity which alone can produce ecstasy."⁶ One can almost hear that voice of light, reverberating along the center of these paintings, questioning the future, reprising the past, and speaking eloquently to today.

—Karen Emenhiser Harris. June, 2016.

NOTES

1. Piero della Francesca's portrait, ca 1472-1474.
2. I'm thinking of *Tableau No. 2/Composition No. VII*, 1913, where a study of a tree finds its essential form in a similar network of line.
3. *Aesthetic Meditations on Painting: The Cubist Painters* by Guillaume Apollinaire "The new painters do not propose, any more than did the old, to be geometricians. But, it may be said that geometry is to the plastic arts what grammar is to the art of the writer. Today scholars no longer hold to the three dimensions of the Euclidean geometries. The painters have been led quite naturally and, so to speak, by intuition, to preoccupy themselves with possible new measures of space, which in the language of modern studios has been designated briefly and altogether by the term the fourth dimension. The fourth dimension as it is presented to the understanding from the plastic point of view would be engendered by the three known dimensions; it would show the immensity of space eternalized in every direction at a given moment."
4. Suggested by Arthur J. Miller in *Einstein, Picasso: Space, Time, and the Beauty That Causes Havoc*, 2002.
5. From his "Notes to the Bestiary"
6. From Apollinaire's *Aesthetic Meditations on Painting*.

IMAGES

Piet Mondrian, *Tableau II*, 1913, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Joy, *God's Engines*

Joy, *Byzantium Black Sea*

Joy, *Fables of the Reconstruction*

Piero della Francesca, *Portraits of the Duke and Duchess of Urbino, Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza*, 1467-72. (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)

Roman period copy of the Doryphoros of Polykleitos, c. 440 BCE.

Pablo Picasso, *Standing Female Nude*, 1910. (Metropolitan Museum)